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THE CLYFFARDS OF CLYFFE.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,”

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

THE CLOUD IN THE SUNSHINE.

TWO years have passed since the events recorded in the last chapter. Our scene is no longer laid at Clyffe Hall, but far away in the south country ; while the dwelling which is occupied by our *dramatis personæ* is very unpretending. A little low-roofed cottage, set in a garden glowing with spring flowers, such as only flourish so early in a genial climate. The two French windows open on a tiny lawn, smooth as a boy's cheek, and in the centre rises a tall clump of Pampas grass, watered

by a shapely nymph of marble from a marble pitcher; the lawn is girt by a broad purple belt of fuchsia, beyond which lies the garden, not for show alone, but rich in vegetables and savoury herbs; while around all this fairy demesne there runs a waving wall of odorous tamarisk. A waving wall, I say, for though the cottage is nestled in the hollow of a chalk-hill, and the boisterous winds from north and east, which roar and revel on the Downs above, can never reach it, it lies open to the south and west winds, whose soothing song scarce ceases the summer through. With them the swallow comes to nestle neath the eaves, with them the bee (whom on the tiny heights their violence will not permit to ply his thievish trade) to rob the flowers; but on a ledge of chalk, full in

the noonday sun, stand three stout hives, for which the rent is paid in glittering comb, so that the winged thief is rifled in his turn—a few frail trees, warped by the windy years to grow aslant, keep off the westering sun; but all the south is open. To those who sit within, the cottage, the sloping garden, and the sloping down beyond, are seen, and then the sea; but to one who from the window withdraws a pace or two, or lies upon his bed upstairs, the eye looks straight down on the boundless blue of ocean. Ah, precious boon in sickness, to watch the shifting shadows of the clouds, the swirling eddies, the daily battles of the wind and tide; to mark the sea-gulls wheel or blown about by the fierce gusts; to see the glorious company of white-robed ships, which this or that fair

wind has just set free, pass by upon their distant errands, or to gaze upon the more homely toil which, in the little bay, the fishermen are plying; to contemplate the great waters, and those who make their business thereon. Then at night, how the sharp pain is dulled by the sea's monotonous undertone, that lullaby of everlasting rest, or overwhelmed and deadened by the majestic music of the storm!

But there is no sickness in this cottage now; the tall man sitting in the little balcony above the doorway, whose uncovered head almost touches the green roofing, is not bowed by it; nor is the graceful form of his young wife, although a year ago or so she blessed the sea, what time, after her blissful trouble, she lay awake long nights with her sweet babe beside her, sleepless,

but in rest unspeakable. The baby-girl, too, clinging to her mother's skirt, is well and blooming. And yet there is a shadow upon the young wife's brow, which even the sunshine of that tiny presence cannot erase, nor the blithe and the ringing tones of her husband's voice.

"What, my pretty one!" quoth he, "a cloud upon thy brow upon our marriage morning. For shame! Come let me kiss it away, love. Not a word of quarrel have we had yet, though we be such old married folks; but I *shall* quarrel, and spoil our claim to the Dunmow flitch, if you do not smile to-day. No, not an April gleam like that, which leaves your heaven the darker, but a July brightness, that must last all day. Come, smile like my own Mildred."

"My dear, dear husband," answered Mil-

dred, tenderly, "I know I am very foolish, very wrong. There cannot be, of course—there cannot be any real danger to us." She stooped down to her child, and drew her to her bosom, and held her there, and kissed and rocked her to and fro. "It is so long ago, and she has never tracked us yet; and we have taken no one into our confidence, so that neither by design nor carelessness can we ever be betrayed; and living here so far away from her, and under another name, we cannot but be safe—I have said to myself all this a thousand times; and yet, and yet"——

"Yet *what*, Mildred?"

"Well, nothing; you would only laugh at me. But to-day, of all the days in the year—the day when I would wish to feel no touch of gloom—a something—some presentiment of

evil seems to cast its threatening shadow upon my soul. She will never cease to seek us out, Raymond, while life is in her; of that I am right sure. A wolf or blood-hound could not be more stanch, more persistent for ill. When I think of her, I always think of that fell creature, tardy but sure as Fate, which pursues the helpless hare whole days and nights, and at the last—no matter when that is”——

“My dear wife,” interrupted Raymond, impatiently, “you are not complimentary to your aunt Grace at all! The animal you describe is a creature of evil odour called a stoat; moreover, you do not take a high view of my own courage and ability to defend you and little Milly, in calling me a helpless hare. If I be so, and this vermin comes within kicking distance, I know this, she will

find me uncommonly strong in the hind-legs."

"Nay, dearest, while you are with us, I rarely have any fear; but when you leave the cottage even for an hour, and now you are going away to-morrow for two whole nights—ah me, that will be terrible!"

"Why, what a coward has my Mildred become, who used to be so brave."

"That was when I had only myself to take care of; but this little one, Raymond—what would my aunt not give to get her into her power? The baby-heiress of Clyffe! I would that we were what we seem to be here, and she but Milly Hepburn, with nothing to inherit save this little house and ground. We have been happier here than ever we were elsewhere."

"That is very true, love; and I for my

part should be well content to pass all my days here. But if poor Rupert dies—or—or worse, I will not sit down and let that woman usurp my rights, far less my child's. No, that I will not. I know, love, why you shudder. You deem that she would poison me and mine, rather than give up an inch of land, or yield one golden piece. But this poisoning is not so easy as one reads of in the story-books. At Clyffe, indeed, she might have worked her wicked will without much hindrance, or perhaps even subsequent peril; but not so *here*. Moreover, she is not above the law. Her unscrupulous fingers cannot clutch what that bids her to deliver up, any more than they can reach us here to harm yourself, your child, or me. I tell you we are safe, Mildred; and if there is a fear on either side, it should be upon Grace Clyffard's.

Is she to storm and rave for ever, and we to listen shuddering, because we two have chosen to marry?—Have *I* no cause to curse her in my turn; an alien from my home, and forced to keep in hiding like one escaped from prison? I think that I am doing ill in this, wife. If there were no cowards, be sure there would be no tyrants in the world. The sum my poor father gave me is nigh spent; I need the gold he told me with his own lips was left to me in his will. Why should I not claim my own?"

"Raymond, Raymond," cried the young wife passionately, "for Heaven's sake, be patient. Let us not bring the thunderbolt upon ourselves, even if we are fated not to escape it. Gold is indeed precious in Grace Clyffard's greedy eyes, and power, and the pride of station; but revenge is

dearer to her than all. Be sure that on that day when we fled from Clyffe together, upon his very marriage morn, she registered a vow to pay us both."

"I should have thought my lady would have had enough of vows," returned Raymond grimly, "when you kept that oath she so wickedly extorted, to the letter—married her stepson within thirty days! Sweet perjurer! I can forgive poor Rupert's wrath at having missed his prize so narrowly—since he was but her tool, and never knew how cruelly she urged you—but as for her—— Well, let her grind her dainty teeth. To think that after two long years of absence, the memory of this kite should still flutter my dove, though folded in my very arms! Your cheek is chilly, Mildred; are you cold?"

“Yes, a little cold, dear husband. The wind is rising in the west, as though for tempest. We shall have rough weather to-night.”

“’Tis like enough; and if bad weather sets in after this long calm, it will last, I fear. Come, let us have a walk together, while walk we may. Upon one’s wedding-day, a ramble arm-in-arm, Darby and Joan-like, is only fitting. Let us pay a visit to the good lieutenant and his wife.”

“Ay, and take the dear child with us, to see her god-parents,” exclaimed Mildred joyfully.

“You—deceitful—wicked—gipsy,” returned her husband, shaking his finger in reproof; “to see her god-parents, indeed! You want to have her with us—that is all. I do believe you never feel your little treasure safe

unless beneath our eyes. However, just as you like, love; tell Jane, then, to put her bonnet on."

"I had rather carry Milly myself, Ray—Jane is rather busy—and it's such a very little way to the coast-guard station."

"Another white one! It is three miles, if it is a yard. But then the walk is upon the cliff-top, is it not? a very dangerous pathway in a wind; and Jane is such a giddy girl, and can never be brought to understand that she carries so much more than *her* life's worth in her arms, when she has that precious child."

"Nay, Raymond, dear, I know you love it just as much as I do. How thankful you seemed to be when you were told your child was"——

"Ay, true," interrupted Raymond hastily;

“but that was very foolish of me. If he had chanced to be a boy, what then? He would have had a very different bringing-up from that which has ruined so many a Clyffard. He would have been spared the curse which has fallen upon the eldest-born of us for so many generations.”

“And yet how glad you were that it was a girl, Raymond.”

“Was I? Well, perhaps I was; at all events, I love our Milly. Come, button-mouth; give papa a kiss; then get you gone, you and your mother too, and wrap yourselves up warm, lest the rain should catch us before we can get home again.”

With smiles and kisses, he dismissed them both; then left alone in the verandah, he leant upon the wooden rail that faced the lawn, and drew a letter from his pocket;

the address ran thus: Mr. J. HEPBURN, Pampas Cottage, by Westportown. It was written in a cramped and vulgar hand, and in one corner was scrawled "*Immediate*," underlined three times. "How fortunate it was," soliloquized Raymond, "that I chanced to meet the postman in my walk this morning. Otherwise, this letter would have driven my wife wild with terror. She would neither have eaten nor slept till she had compelled me to flee once more from the wrath of this she-devil to some obscure hiding-place, just as we have got reconciled to our little cottage here, and have begun to feel it 'home.' I will burrow no more, but fight it out above ground. The threatened peril is mysterious enough, but the warning puzzles me even more. What a hand my anonymous friend writes; all leaning the

wrong way, like those blown-backward saplings yonder. It may be disguised, of course, but at the best I should say it was no gentleman's hand. I am not much of a critic, but the spelling, too, let alone the composition, appears rather faulty.

"Bewair, Raymond Clyffard. The cat's eyes have found you out at last; find another hoal for a little; and at once. There is danger lurking at your very door.—A TRUE WELL-WISHER."

It is certainly very strange, and stranger that it comes when my poor wife has this nameless dread upon her. It can be no hoax, for nobody save those we have most cause to fear could have supplied the materials for it. The post-mark is Westportown only; therefore, the writer cannot be very far off. But except the simple folks whom

we are about to visit, what Wellwisher have I about here, or indeed anywhere, alas! We are compelled to impose even upon these good people; to lead a life of deception, to exist humbly, furtively! What a fool was I to pass my word to Mildred that it should always be so until Rupert"—— He thrust the letter into his bosom as his young wife rejoined him, equipped for walking, and with the child in her arms.

"Well, you *have* been quick," said he. "What, Milly want a toss before she starts? Give her to me, then, mamma. Nay, now I've got her, I shall carry her myself; all strategies are fair in love, as in war: she is my lawful prize."

It was a fair picture—that stalwart father with the wee bairn cradled in one shelter-

ing arm, and the other thrown around his wife protectingly; and yet there was something in his eyes beside their love: the fire that glows within the eagle's orbs what time she sees the fowler inch by inch descending from the crag upon her eyrie, axe in hand, to bear away her young.

CHAPTER II.

THE PREVENTIVE STATION.

THE path which led from Pampas Cottage to the coast-guard station lay westward along the shore, and for a little distance after passing by the fishing hamlet, as Raymond had said, close to the cliff top, but soon descended, not to the beach, but through an intermediate belt of rock and underwood between the cliff and the sea. Here, sheltered from the rising wind, and amid a verdant wilderness of thorn and hazel, it was easy to have imagined it was midsummer. The jackdaws slid in circles

from the cliff; the wood-lark hanging in the sheltered air poured forth his love; the linnet whistled to his mate from the warm bush; and flitting from shrub to shrub, the tiny wren twitted his mite of thanks in God's own ear. At times, too, from a broad bank of brier, that, like a frieze, stood out from the white cliff, a hawk would shoot forth, noiseless and swift as light, and poise above the peaceful scene, like Satan watching our blameless Parents in their sleep; then shooting up above the down, would glide and poise again, despite the wind, and yet again would rise for broader view, to fall—a malignant star—and strike his innocent prey in some seeming sheltered homestead.

No homestead is, however, visible to human eye—no sign of the presence of man.

The broken rocks, indeed, resemble often human architecture—here a fluted shaft, and there a column with its capital acanthus-wreathed—but some great throe of Nature has so strewn them there, who in her pangs can fashion things more beautiful than Art can mould in years of patient toil. The sea is sailless, save for one speck of white, which, like a pure soul passing to eternity, goes suddenly out on the horizon's verge.

“Is not this a very paradise, my Mildred?” exclaimed Raymond enthusiastically.

“It is indeed, dear Ray. May Heaven's angels guard us while we tarry in it.”

“Amen,” answered Raymond gravely. “Not, however,” added he more cheerfully, “that I am aware of our needing any special guardian,

other than what all mortals need against their spiritual foe. As for mortal enemies, never, surely, was a little household so girt about with defenders as is ours. The smugglers in the village would fight for you as resolutely as ever they fought for an anker of rum; while the good lieutenant and his twenty men here would draw their cutlasses in your defence as gallantly as though you were the Inland Revenue herself. What a snug home they have yonder! Of all the comfortable-looking, ship-shape, spick-and-pan residences that men can dwell in, I do think a Preventive Station is the most enviable."

The path had gradually risen until it brought them in sight of the tenement in question, a long low line of building, with a verandah in front of it, and a large

garden, which extended to the sandy shore. They stood now at the look-out station, marked by a mast for signal-flags, and sheltered by a turf-bank from the wind, with the grass worn almost bare upon it in places where the man on duty was wont to lay his telescope—altogether a snug vantage-ground enough, and of course commanding a great expanse of view. The picturesque broken ground over which the three had come, upon one side; and on the other, a white curved bay, with the coast-guard boat high on the shining sand, but ready to be launched at a minute's notice; while in front the sea could be swept for scores of miles. But by far the most noticeable feature of "the Look-out" was certain carved wooden images stuck up on end, which gave to it the appearance

of a spot dedicated to heathen rites. These idols, though representing the softer sex as often as the masculine, were by no means remarkable for personal beauty. Not one had been permitted to retain its entire complement of limbs, and if a lady had managed to preserve the aquilinity of her nose, she might consider herself a fortunate exception. These were figure-heads of vessels which the cruel waves had mutilated, when they cast the ships to which they belonged upon that long low reef to westward, stretching far out to sea. Already, with the growing wind, the waters churned and foamed there in white malice; but in that comparative calm it was impossible to picture what wild work they made there during a storm. What hours of human agony had been witnessed by those pitiless cliffs, when,

scudding before the gale, the helpless ships came on to their doom among the hissing breakers! What vain resolutions of repentance had they beheld in the white scared faces of whom Death was beckoning—what dumb resolve to meet the worst like men!

From Deadman's Reef, no living man or woman ever yet came to land; nay, the bodies of the Drowned which strewed the coast for days after a wreck could scarcely be called human, so bruised and mangled were they by the sharp and jagged rocks; but at very low tide the Reef was not without its attractions. Gold had been found there, and was found there still in old-world or alien coins, guineas, moidores, dollars, and doubloons; while it was even said that on a time when a ship from the

Indies was there wrecked, the silver sand of Lucky Bay (so called in consequence) had been mingled with sparkling gold-dust, and that the ivory teeth of elephants glistened upon the bare brown beach. The little churchyard, some four miles away, was three parts occupied with the bones thus cast on shore; most of them nameless and unknown, and buried in one mighty grave with a common headstone, *Sacred to the Memory of the Crew of this or that vessel, who perished in a Storm off Dead-man's Reef*, and then the date. Nay, sometimes the very ship was nameless; her home-port and her destination alike unknown; and the part of the world she came from only guessed by her scattered and ownerless cargo. And yet, those who perished in her had relatives, and friends, and lovers, like the

rest of us, and for long years were watched for, doubtless, and Heaven importuned for them—not altogether, let us hope, in vain.

But it is an ill wind that blows no one any good, and the coast population thereabouts were by no means averse to a south-west gale, and what it brought them. “Death is king, and *vivat* wrecks,” was their motto; and many a cottage in the neighbourhood of Lucky Bay was indebted for its most ambitious piece of furniture to the fury of the winds and waves. Such waifs were reckoned as the gifts of Providence, and accepted by the simple folk with genuine thankfulness, much as a good harvest might be acknowledged by the pious elsewhere. In old times there had been ugly stories afloat of ships having been

lured to their destruction by false lights, professing to be safety-beacons; but whether true or false, such matters belonged to the past only. Above the cliffs which looked down on the reef, there was now a little light-house, which shot a fiery warning far out to sea; and this was served by a couple of men, who resided by turns with the coast-guard, there being only room for one lodger in this pocket Pharos. Thus, Lucky Bay was dedicated, as it were, to the protection of life as well as property, and seemed, at least to one of the three persons who were now looking down upon it, as the most desirable of human homes.

“How I wish that we lived here, dear Raymond, with those good kind Careys, watched night and day by trusty guardians, instead of in our lonely cottage, where,

whenever you are absent, I feel so forlorn and unprotected. See, there is the lieutenant himself, and with a stranger too, as it seems; at least, I never saw him about the station before."

"Perhaps he is some official visitor, or superintendent; Carey told me the other day that he was expecting some person of that kind. Look how he is pointing out to him the vegetable lions; I think I can hear him telling about those potatoes having been dibbled in by old Jacob, the lantern-keeper, with his own wooden leg; that's one of the old gentleman's stock stories. Ah, now he sees us. Look how he interrupts his talk, and breaks away from his visitor at once to come and bid you welcome; we may be sure, therefore, that he is not the inspector."

Certainly, if such he was, Lieutenant Carey paid less respect than is usual in such cases to an official superior, striding away from him with rapid steps to meet the new-comers, and pouring forth, in a rich and powerful voice, a rain of welcomes as he came.

“This is charming of you, Mrs. Hepburn; this is very friendly to walk so far to our poor home; and to bring your treasure with you too—my little godchild. Marion, Marion!” (here he raised his voice, as though contending with some fancied strife of the elements); “come out, wife; here are the Hepburns.” Then, as he and his visitors approached one another, he went on in what he honestly considered to be confidential tones, but which could be heard in a favourable wind about half a mile.

“I am so delighted to see you, Hepburn; always delighted, of course, but particularly so to-day. Here’s a strange lubber come to stay with me from the *Crown* of Westportown, recommended by the landlord—a man whom one respects, and to whom I am under obligations, but—just as though I kept a tavern like himself. ‘My friend, Mr. Stevens,’ writes he, ‘is exceedingly anxious to see the coast near Lucky Bay, and especially the Mermaid Cavern, during these spring-tides; and there being no accommodation for himself nearer than this, and much more for his man (who remains here), I have ventured to ask you to give him a shake-down for a night or two.’ That’s just what the fellow writes, and here is this Mr. Stevens—a lubber, sir, a lubber—upon my hands. I have not an

hour's time to spare, in expectation of this inspection. *You* must shew him the Mermaid Cavern, Hepburn; *you* must shew him the coast."

A stout, florid, and, notwithstanding his present trouble, a very cheerful-looking man, was Lieutenant Carey, though he had been pitted by the small-pox in a manner which, he was wont himself to say, was no mere seaming. Though it was his way to be eloquent upon whatever annoyed him, he was by no means of a repining character, otherwise finding himself a lieutenant still, after about forty years of sea-service, he might perhaps have considered his own case a hard one, and Lucky Bay rather a misnomer as his place of residence. But, on the contrary, not only did he make the very best of his position, but entertained

the visionary idea that it would be improved some day; that to have a post in the coast-guard was not another name for being put on the shelf; and that a day would come when he would sniff the incense of official favour, and be rear-admiral of half the colours of the rainbow before he died. It was a happy faith, and must have been shared in those evil days of favouritism by many another gallant seaman, or surely the Lords of Admiralty would have all met their doom at the hands of naval Bellinghams; grey-headed mates must have hanged themselves from the yard-arm, and shipless commanders taken to fresh water in despair from the top of Waterloo Bridge. It was Lieutenant Carey's belief, in spite of some adverse evidence, that the Admiralty kept a favourable eye upon him.

It was true, indeed, that there had been no indecent haste in promoting their protégé, but what they had said to themselves was this: "Whatever happens, we have John Carey in reserve; we know where to find him—we know where to lay our hand upon him; and by" (here they swore a little, as it was the fashion to do in those days, particularly when under the influence of friendly emotions)—"and by the Lord Harry, but some day we'll do it." That day was still indefinite, and being so, why, it might be any day. Therefore, Lieutenant Carey held himself constantly in readiness for promotion, kept his preventive station in an absolutely flawless state of discipline and perfection; and could have exchanged it for the stern-cabin of any vessel suitable for a young Commander of four-and-fifty at a

moment's notice, and with a good conscience. In the meantime, he indulged his imagination by putting much superior ships in commission than were likely to fall to his share at first, and in reading his own appointment thereto upon the quarter-deck to a crew that had flocked in hundreds to serve under his respected name. He had even concocted a little speech, very short and very pithy, to deliver under those precise circumstances; and pending their occurrence, had repeated it to Marion, his wife, about one hundred and forty times.

“Don't you think it will be the right sort of thing to say, Marion?” he would inquire; and after every repetition, Mrs. Carey would gravely reply, “It couldn't be better, John.” She took an immense inter-

est in the alterations which he had determined to make in the cabin arrangements, which was the less to be wondered at since they had nothing but her own convenience and comfort in view; for in those days a sea-captain in His Majesty's service was permitted to have his wife on board with him; and had it not been so, good John Carey's dream would have been robbed of half its pleasure. Marion had been the only daughter of his friend and co-religionist—for Carey was a Catholic, a circumstance which perhaps did not benefit his professional prospects in those days—Lieutenant Henry Linton, who was struck down by his side at the battle of Aboukir, by a spar from the French ship *L'Orient*, when that great vessel was blown to fragments with a thousand men in her, and with his last words he

had commended the friendless girl to Carey's protection. No bequest, drawn up and sealed with whatever formalities, could have been obeyed with more duteous care; the idea of failing in such a sacred duty never entered into his thoughts; but the execution of it was not easy. Little Marion, at a girl's school at Hammersmith, had first to be written to by the bluff sailor, who was terribly put to it how to break such bad news by letter; then the scanty pension the child received from government had to be supplemented from the lieutenant's own purse, in order that her scholastic advantages should be still continued to her, and this necessitated a different system in his own expenditure, which for his means had been hitherto profuse, not to say prodigal. Then, when on shore, those interviews with Miss

Backboard, the schoolmistress—who nearly had a fit upon his happening, in the ordinary course of conversation, to mention the Lord Harry—were very trying; and more embarrassing yet did matters become, when Miss Marion, grown to womanhood, seemed to have a difficulty in calling him papa, which she had done for the last half-dozen years, and could not kiss his weather-beaten cheek as usual without a blush upon her own pretty face.

Then with a delicacy of expression such as my Lord Chesterfield could not have achieved, although he had sat up half the night racking his brain for courtly phrases, the lieutenant just appointed to Lucky Bay had offered his horny hand to the friendless girl, to have and to hold in marriage, if such an unequal match could really be con-

templated by her with favour; though if not, the hand was hers still, so long as life was in it, dedicated to her service for her defence and succour always. But Marion Linton accepted her benefactor as her husband, and had never had any serious cause to regret that she had done so. No kinder heart ever beat beneath a blue jacket, nor were its noble simplicity and unselfishness lost upon her. Each, as they imagined, owed a great debt of gratitude to the other, and every day, strange as it sounds, that debt increased by mutual repayment. Without uxoriousness, which was foreign to his bluff and healthy nature, he was as devoted to her as he had promised to be if he had not become her husband; while she was anchored to him fast by that trustiest cable whose

strands are Reverence and Esteem as well as Love. Lieutenant John Carey had, in short, fallen into luck's way at last, and, as it was his delight to boast, with small thanks to the Admiralty. Their favour had not been demonstrated, and was therefore yet to come; and how so likely to come as through their own official visitor, at present expected? This it was that made the good lieutenant so chary of his hospitality at this particular juncture, and so anxious to shift the burden of entertaining his strange guest upon Raymond's shoulders.

CHAPTER III.

MR. STEVENS.

“MR. STEVENS,” said the lieutenant, as he and the visitors from Pampas Cottage came up with that gentleman, “let me introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Hepburn. Although a comparative newcomer into the neighbourhood, Mr. Hepburn knows more about the coast than the coast-guard, more about the Mermaid Cavern than the mermaids themselves. There could not have been a more fortunate meeting for your purpose than is this. I could not have found you so good a guide had I

pressed half the rascals in Sandby—smugglers mostly, by-the-by, whom this lady tends in sickness, and encourages by every means in her power; and he is an idle man is Hepburn. No inspection to attend to, no superior to stand in awe of.”

“With the exception, I am sure our gallant friend must mean, of Mrs. Hepburn,” said the stranger, with a smileless bow.

“Very good; very true; bravo!” responded the lieutenant, rubbing his hands. “My dear Marion, you should have been here to have heard what Mr. Stevens says.”

“Well, my dear John, I am here now. Perhaps Mr. Stevens will be kind enough to say it again,” said the lady in question, emerging from the little trellised porch, almost the only decoration by which the

lieutenant's residence was distinguished from those of the men under his command. Then without waiting to listen to the remark in question, she greeted Raymond and his wife, and began to caress the child, with much more fervour of affection than is usual with women who are wives, but not mothers. Mrs. Carey was very comely, and even youthful still. Hers was a face, indeed, which does not lose its youth even amid grey hairs and wrinkles, and both these were a score of years away as yet. But her chief charm was her voice—so gentle, so tender, so confidence-inviting to all who seemed to be worthy of her esteem—and she was very charitable in her estimation of that worthiness—and yet so dignified, so calmly courteous, distant as a star, when addressing those who repelled

the trusty needle of her heart. Among the flock of rough fellows beneath the lieutenant's command, most of them would have laid down their lives for her sweet sake; but a few blacksheep, conscious that she knew their characters far better than the simple lieutenant did, heartily wished him unmarried.

"Now, pray come within doors, my dear Mrs. Hepburn," cried she; "and if you and your husband will share with us our mid-day meal, it will be very kind of you."

"Well, the fact is, I am afraid of a storm," replied Raymond. "It would not do for my wife and child to be caught in one of your sou'westers. What do you say, O most weather-wise Mariner? Come, tell us the truth; though I own nothing

would give us greater pleasure than to dine with such kind friends, and especially to-day."

"There, if we didn't clean forget it, Marion!" exclaimed the lieutenant. "Upon my word, this is too bad. And to call ourselves old friends, too!"

"Nay, Mr. Carey, your wife didn't forget it," observed Mrs. Hepburn reprovingly; "she whispered to me her congratulations when she kissed me."

"I assure you, my dear Carey, nothing of that sort happened to *me*," remarked Raymond with mock gravity. "*I* have received no congratulations; and I thought it a piece of great unfriendliness and neglect on your part."

"Pooh, pooh," answered the lieutenant merrily. "I don't care about *you* at all; I was only thinking of your dear wife."

“Upon my word!” ejaculated Raymond, “but this is very pretty.”

“She is not only very pretty, but very good,” continued the lieutenant enthusiastically; “and I was a stupid old sea-monster not to remember. My dear Mrs. Hepburn, I wish you many happy returns of the day.”

“You hear that, Mrs. Carey?” cried Raymond; “he wishes my wife a widow, and more than once! Because he is married himself, and cannot have her, he maliciously desires the death, not only of myself, but of any person who may happen to take Mrs. Hepburn’s fancy after my decease.”

“Is it possible?” asked Mr. Stevens blandly, while the laughter still broke like running-fire from Raymond and the two

ladies; and the lieutenant stood smiling, but shaking his head, as though they were much too hard upon him; "Is it possible that Mr. Carey has wished this lady many happy returns of her wedding-day?"

"That's just it," said the lieutenant; "but there, I own always to forgetting that Mrs. Hepburn is married at all. I thought that I was speaking to a young school-girl like Marion used to be, and wishing her joy of her birthday. They look more like boy and girl, the pair of them, do they not?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Hepburn are very young," returned the stranger coldly; "the happy day, of which this is the anniversary, cannot have been very far distant. Two years ago, I should say, at latest."

"By the Lord Harry!" cried the lieutenant,

slapping his leg, "but Mr. Stevens has guessed it—guessed the very time that you two were made one. Now, *I* should never have guessed it—never. Indeed, my private opinion is, that it's all nonsense still. They're not married, bless you; they're only children playing at being married—although, to be sure, there's Milly"—

The consciousness of having said something indecorous, here struck the lieutenant dumb; like that figure-head of the good ship *Fame*, which reposed in his own Look-out, his cheeks grew red and swollen, while, for want of a trumpet to blow, they emitted a loud and prolonged whistle.

"Milly is rather an uncommon name," observed the stranger, breaking the somewhat embarrassing silence: "it is the short, I conclude, for Melissa."

“For Mildred, sir,” replied Mrs. Hepburn courteously. “She is named after myself.”

“A pretty name, and a pretty child,” returned the stranger, leaning forward, and regarding it with attention. “But, dear me, she seems very timid.”

It may have been, as Mr. Stevens said, that the child was easily frightened, or it may have been that his own countenance, being morose and stern, was not calculated to inspire an infant with much confidence; but certain it was that Miss Mildred Hepburn here set up such a wail of dissatisfaction as caused her removal within doors, which, of course, compelled the secession of the two ladies.

“I am extremely sorry, Mr. Hepburn,” observed the stranger apologetically; “I

ought to have remembered that I have a very repulsive exterior, although within, I trust, I am not less well-meaning than other people."

"My dear sir," replied Raymond much distressed, "there is no need for such contrition. No one can calculate upon a baby's whims and fancies.—Carey was saying you want to see the coast-line hereabouts. Now, if you are going to make any stay here, I shall be delighted to be your guide. But the fact is, I shall be from home the next two days; I have to go to Marmouth to-morrow about engaging a sailing-boat for the summer."

"And those are the only two days I have at my disposal," replied the stranger regretfully.

"I tell you *what*," exclaimed the lieutenant;

“you could walk with Hepburn as far as you please upon his way, which lies along the most magnificent part of the coast, over the East Downs, and then—if you didn’t mind—you could walk back again.”

“Thank you,” returned Mr. Stevens drily; “but perhaps I should be an incumbrance to Mr. Hepburn.”

“Far from it, my dear sir,” returned Raymond earnestly; “I shall be delighted to have your company. I am quite grieved that you have come at so unpropitious a time; for the fact is, I have generally nothing at all to do; and, indeed, our friend here—when he does not happen to be expecting a visit from his superior—is not overworked either.”

“Don’t say that, Hepburn—don’t say that,” broke in the lieutenant; “I have

plenty to do, and I hope do my duty, although it is not so agreeable to me as that which would fall to my lot if I were afloat.—Ahem, ahem.”

“What on earth does Carey mean?” thought Raymond. “Why does the good soul boast himself after this fashion, and then cough as if he was ashamed of it? It is evident, however, that he wants to get this fellow off his hands.—With regard to the Mermaid’s Cavern,” added he, aloud, “I have thought how an opportunity may be afforded Mr. Stevens of seeing that. Is it not the day after to-morrow that your provision-boat comes in from Marmouth? Well, why should it not drop this gentleman at the cavern on its return-voyage?”

“A capital idea!” quoth the lieutenant, thoughtfully. “But then it’s a weary way

round the cliffs back again, unless there is somebody to shew him the short cut over the Downs."

"Well, I dare say my wife will shew him," answered Raymond, good-naturedly. "I am vain enough to think that time will hang heavy on her hands in my absence. She and the nurse might just as well walk to the Mermaid's Cavern as anywhere else; while I know little Milly will be delighted with the sea-flowers."

"I cannot venture to ask such a favour as that," observed Mr. Stevens, gravely.

"I will ask it myself, my dear sir," returned Raymond, with cheerfulness, "and let you know to-morrow."

"Thank you very much," cried the stranger.

"And *I* thank you, too," quoth the lieu-

tenant, slapping his young friend on the back. "But let me tell you one thing, Hepburn, although it may seem somewhat inhospitable, you have only half an hour or so to get home with a dry skin. The storm is brewing apace yonder. One of my men shall go with you with a couple of boat-cloaks, and an umbrella also, if you please; although I doubt whether an umbrella can live in such weather as is promised by those clouds."

"Permit *me* to carry the boat-cloaks," entreated the stranger, earnestly; "let me do something in return for the trouble I am about to give, and in reparation for the mischief I have involuntarily committed. Moreover, by that means I shall learn where your house is, at which I conclude I am to call to-morrow morning in order to accompany you on your journey."

“I am sure you are very polite,” returned Raymond, frigidly, not altogether relishing, perhaps, the addition of the self-invited stranger to their little party in a walk upon that particular day. “Here is my wife, I see, all ready, warned of her danger by prudent Mrs. Carey, I do not doubt.”

“I have turned her out of doors,” laughed that good lady, as she followed her guest into the garden, “for it is not right that either she or the child should be caught in the coming storm. If she could have dined and slept here—and we have both bed and board to spare, although of the humblest—that would have been an excellent plan; but she said very rudely that she would rather be at home, alone with you.”

“Welcome the coming, speed the parting

guest,' is a motto that we think highly of in the north," observed Mr. Stevens, gathering the boat-cloaks, which the lieutenant had brought out in the meantime, under his arm. —"I believe that Hepburn is a northern name, by-the-bye, is it not?"

"I dare say it is," answered Raymond, drily; "but we are southern folks ourselves. —Good-bye, Mrs. Carey; good-bye, dear lieutenant."

"Good-bye, Hepburn; and God bless you," whispered the old gentleman, "for being so civil to that lubber; he has taken quite a fancy to you, it seems, and declines to let me accompany you, and help to carry the cloaks. Do you know, between you and me, I can't help thinking that he may be the Inspector himself; that's why I stopped you just now when you were saying that I

wasn't overworked. I have told him that I haven't a moment I can call my own. Now, do you go on being civil to him—there's a good fellow. It's just the sort of device the government would adopt in order to see if a fellow's doing his duty; just the sort of thing, too, for doing which you would give a man a round dozen on board ship. But there—that's all a matter of opinion. When the Admiralty has once got its eye upon a fellow, they try him in all sorts of ways, to be quite sure he is genuine. There is certainly something underhand in this Stevens's looks, though it only struck me for the first time when I introduced him to yourself. I am pretty confident he *is* the Inspector."

Without much belief in the surmise of the good lieutenant, the expression of his

wish was quite sufficient to make Raymond more than courteous to his new companion. He walked a little in advance of his wife and Mr. Stevens, for the child he carried in his arms was still curiously impatient of the latter's presence; but while he did so, he managed to converse about the locality and its wonders in a manner that seemed to interest the stranger greatly; so much so, indeed, that he rarely interrupted him, except with some interjection of admiration or agreement; nay, even when Hepburn pointed out some object of interest within view, Mr. Stevens would bestow but a passing glance upon it, and then his keen grey eyes would flash back again upon the speaker, and be riveted upon him as fixedly as before. Ere they parted, it was quite settled by the two gentlemen that their

purpose of walking together towards Marmouth the next morning was to hold good, no matter what should be the weather; while Mildred, upon her part, promised to take her walk on the day after in the direction of the Mermaid's Cavern, if the expected storm should abate sufficiently to make such an expedition feasible.

"I suppose Mr. Stevens knows," said she to her husband, "that the cavern is only open for two hours, even in these low spring-tides."

"Yes, I have been informed of that," returned the stranger. "The tide will leave it free on Thursday between two and four. If the weather be fine, I shall stay there to the last moment, in hopes of madam's coming; so I hope she will not leave me to drown."

“I am afraid you will be well-nigh drowned this afternoon before you get back to the station,” observed Raymond. “The rain is beginning already; see how the mist comes on like a wall. Yonder is our little cottage; we, for our part, are quite safe now. But you, sir—will you not step in and rest a little?”

Perhaps the invitation was not given very cordially: at all events, the reply was in the negative.

“Not to-day, Mr. Hepburn. I will do myself the pleasure of calling for you to-morrow, however, at the hour you mentioned. I wish you a very good evening, sir, and madam.”

He did not offer to shake hands, and as if to prevent their doing so, stepped backward as he bowed his farewell.

“Good-bye, sir,” replied the Hepburns, bowing in their turn, “good-bye until to-morrow.”

“Ay, good-bye until to-morrow for *one*,” muttered the stranger, as he set his face against the driving mist; “good-bye until the next day for the other. If this be not killing my two birds with one shot, it is bringing them down with a double barrel.”

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT OF STORM.

“**R**AYMOND, dear, do you know I don’t like that man?” said Mildred earnestly, as they sought the shelter of their little cottage.

“Yes, I do know it, my love,” returned her husband laughing. “You looked at him, when he frightened little Milly with his ugly face, very much as you would look at an ogre sharpening his teeth before a baby-feast. He is, however, only one of those uncomfortable persons who take even their pleasures sadly. It is only charitable

to suppose that there is something really estimable lying deep hid within such undemonstrative folks, which would exhibit itself, if an opportunity of sufficient magnitude should occur. Under ordinary circumstances, they certainly appear morose and disagreeable enough. But it is the poor lieutenant who has cause to complain rather than we. A couple of walks with this Mr. Stevens is the limit of our self-sacrifice; but to have such a wet blanket for a guest in one's own house, in weather like this, with the idea, too, which Carey has got hold of, that he is a coast-guard inspector in disguise—why, with all his seaman's superstitions, I should think he would consider Friday next, which rids him of his friend, a lucky day."

"But Mrs. Carey doesn't think he is an

inspector," observed Mildred thoughtfully.

"Well, I hope not," laughed Raymond, "for I never saw her behave so frigidly to anybody since that scoundrel, Lieutenant Topsell, threw the poor, half-drowned Newfoundland back into the surf last winter, and she declined to sit down to dinner with him. What does she think about this Stevens?"

"She scarcely knows what to think; but she has a half-suspicion that, instead of his being a coast-guard official, he is upon quite the other side. The landlord of the *Crown* is an obliging person, and stands very well with the lieutenant, but, as she thinks, without much reason. He has endeavoured to shew himself a friend to the Revenue upon more than one occasion; but his informations are always laid a little late. At the pres-

ent time, it seems the Lucky Bay people have received a hint from other quarters that 'a run' is to be soon attempted upon a large scale, and, of course, if this be so, a spy such as Stevens in the enemy's camp would be invaluable."

"I should have thought Mrs. Carey was too sensible a woman to entertain such far-fetched apprehensions," answered Raymond carelessly; "but whether this gentleman be coast-guardsmen or smuggler is no concern of ours, but of the Revenue. So long as we are in these parts, I have made up my mind to mix myself up with neither side. We have never bought a yard of lace or a bottle of brandy since we have been here, although I doubt if those commodities are to be got anywhere else so cheap as in this hamlet of Sandby;

upon the other hand, it is not my business to tell Carey that Simon Reeves has got a cellar under his hearthstone, or that Walter Dickson's boat has a false bottom. That was the new parson's great mistake here, and which has entirely destroyed his usefulness. A priest of our religion would have been more adroit. And yet, to find himself blocked out of his own pulpit, on the very first Sunday, by kegs of *eau de vie*! Can't you fancy old Reeves explaining in a whisper, from the clerk's desk beneath, that there was really nowhere else to put them for a day or two, and requesting his reverence to preach from where he was, instead of shifting!" Raymond roared with laughter at the picture he was thus drawing of a circumstance that had actually occurred but lately in the parish

church ; but Mildred scarcely smiled. Again and again, her husband rallied her upon her silence and melancholy ; at dinner, when he toasted her lovingly in a full bumper, and made her drink a glass herself to the health of little Milly, she did contrive to cast them off for awhile ; but afterwards, as the evening drew on, and the storm increased, her vague forebodings once more seemed to take possession of her, and after one or two attempts to win her to cheerful talk, Raymond himself grew silent.

Conversation, however, was by that time rendered almost impossible by the violence of the rain, shuddering against the windows, and beating with monotonous thud upon the straw-thatched roof. After they had retired to rest, and Raymond had fallen asleep, and the waxen lids of the little

child in the cot by her side were closed in slumber, Mildred lay wide awake, consumed with shadowy fears. To be in the same room with one who sleeps, is, in some respects, to be more lonely than if quite companionless. There is something awful in the thought that, though the body is there, the soul of our companion is probably far away; that the reins of his own being are out of his control; that he is separated from us, and even from himself, as thoroughly, for the time, as though he were Dead. The quiet breathing may indeed assure us that he lives; but the shut face and motionless limbs irresistibly remind us of that time when those eyes will never open to gladden us more, or those lips bless us with gracious speech—when we shall be Alone indeed, and all the sympathy

that man can heap upon us will not avail to fill up the aching void in our hearts by ever so little, and when the best comfort that God himself can give us—or so it seems to our poor stricken souls—is to let *us* die too. I doubt if it is usual for even the most worldly-minded—the merest slave of scrip and share—to weave, under such circumstances, the same gross web of contrivance that solely usurps his thoughts by day. He does not surely lie on his sleepless pillow while his true wife slumbers by his side, calculating still, like some horizontal triumph of Professor Babbage, without one thought of Him who made him and the hushed world rotating without, and the stars which no accountant can number.

At all events, such was always a solemn

time to Mildred Clyffard, and would have been solemn now had it not been terrible. The world was far from hushed, nor were the stars shining. The elements were at deadly strife, as we mortals say, when Rain and Wind are only fulfilling God's word; and except that the forces employed were far more prodigious, it was wonderfully like a battle among men. There were pauses when the powers of the storm seemed gathering themselves together as after a repulse, only to make a more tremendous onset. Then the skirmishers—the sharp, thin, driving rain—were pushed forward in countless thousands, and the tempest came rolling up behind them, column upon column, while the heavy guns thundered ceaselessly—the awful diapason of the sea! Then, again, at the bidding of some solitary

blast, which might well be taken for a trumpet sounding the récall, the legions of the air would grudgingly retire, and gather together as before.

Mildred was no coward; but oppressed as she now was by premonitions of evil, the viewless war that was raging without appeared to have some affinity with the vague dangers that seemed to threaten her and hers. Mechanically she stretched her arm over her unconscious child, as though to protect her from some imaginary foe. If Heaven should see fit to take her husband from her, what *would* become of their child? She might not herself die—as she would wish to do—having that sacred trust, the guardianship of the little Milly, committed to her; but how should she be able to fulfil it? It was not the

apprehension of poverty, the fear of being unable, in such a case, alone to support the child, which struck a chill to her mother-heart; but the sense, should Raymond be removed, of the utter defencelessness of their position, and of the unswerving resolution of their mortal enemy. During the first year of her marriage, and while her husband was all in all to her, she was not thus troubled. From what she knew, indeed, of the implacable disposition of her aunt, she was well aware that the endeavours to discover their whereabouts never flagged, and that, when found, some terrible vengeance would be attempted, and perhaps perpetrated. Still—suppose the very worst that could happen—suppose they slew her Raymond—well, let them slay her also. It would not be difficult for one like

her to die, having nothing left to live for. But now, with little Milly, although Raymond was no dearer to her than before—for that he could not be—yet how infinitely more precious was his life! Even this deep sleep of his filled her with the sense of separation. How would she feel, then, when he should in reality have left her? She did not venture to picture the *loss* of him, though a sudden shrinking of the heart told her that such a thought had passed unbidden athwart her brain; but how would she feel *to-morrow*, when he would in reality be absent? How would she feel in such another night of storm, when there should be no protector beside her, whom she could wake with a touch, as now, and cry, “Raymond, I fear;” and straight be comforted?

Her husband had never left her for a single night before. She dreaded his absence beyond measure, although she could not explain her fears even to herself. The expectation of it had thrown a shadow upon her life ever since she had heard of his intention of going to Marmouth, and had even saddened, as we have seen, the anniversary of their marriage-day. Ay, it was now two years since she had escaped from that dread slavery—from the woman who had claimed her very heart to dispose of as her own—and began to breathe an atmosphere of liberty and love. For two years, her former taskmistress had been foiled in her schemes of vengeance, for that schemes she had had was as certain as that the thunder-cloud holds the lightning. But was

it always to be so? Was not this present happiness too great to be enjoyed, notwithstanding that it was thus marred by her fears? Would not those fears be one day realised? And at what time was this more likely to take place than when Raymond and she were temporarily separated? Upon whom would the blow first fall?

An intermission longer than usual was taking place in the elemental war without; mutterings only were to be heard, as though the powers of the air were counselling together as to the point against which they should next direct their fury.

Suddenly, and yet with the naturalness peculiar to the situation, for nothing that occurs to our minds at such a time seems strange or to demand inquiry as to how it got there—suddenly, Mildred's thoughts reverted

to Mr. Stevens. Why did Mrs. Carey dislike him so? A good woman, if ever there was one, was the lieutenant's wife; sincere and pure, and with a marvellous faculty for discernment of character, which the pure sometimes possess—even the simplest, such as children—as though the crystal soul shrank from gross contact, as the Venice glass shrinks and proclaims the presence of the poison. As for herself, Mildred was aware of the want of foundation in her own suspicions; she suspected every stranger of boding them no good. That very Lieutenant Topsell, whom Raymond had spoken of that afternoon, she had identified in some manner with their enemies; and indeed his merciless and brutal character seemed to have fitted him for the ally of her she feared. But she had been mistaken

in that case, and had done the poor wretch wrong, who had since then met with his end, and not discredibly for that matter, fighting against overwhelming odds in his lawful calling. But this Stevens, who had given no evidence of an evil disposition, why did she shrink from *him*, in spite of herself? Why had she shuddered to see his cold grey eyes riveted upon Raymond? And why did the threatened absence of her husband on the morrow seem to lower more menacingly because he was to be accompanied by this man upon some portion of the way? She had no fear but that her Raymond was a match, and more than a match, for him, but his very strength and courage made him careless and unsuspecting; and, besides, what could the strongest arm avail against a deadly weapon?

While her mind indulged itself with this ghastly apprehension, she was by no means insensible of the extreme improbability of the event her imagination thus foreshadowed; but the idea grew upon her nevertheless, until she had made up her mind to send Mrs. Carey a private note in the morning to entreat that the lieutenant would accompany his guest in the proposed excursion. She knew that the wife would sympathise with her terrors—doubly unreasonable though they must seem to her, who knew nothing of the Hepburns' former history—and she knew that the gallant coastguardsman would run the risk of losing promotion to a line-of-battle ship, no matter how imminent it might seem, rather than let her suffer the heartache. As for meeting Mr. Stevens herself in the Mermaid's Cave, on the ensuing

afternoon, that might be considered afterwards; sufficient for the next day was the possible evil thereof. In the meantime, she had mentally arranged for Raymond's safety. Thus relieved from her more immediate fear, and the rain and wind keeping an armed truce, if not subsiding, tardy sleep touched her eyelids, as it had long ago sealed those of the other two occupants of that little room. Mildred's spirit, too, was freed from the trammels of the flesh, and roamed, only God knows how, through space and time. How long she slept, a minute or an hour, she could not tell, but she awoke with a spasm of terror, amid the raging of such a tempest as made what had preceded it seem but as the light winds that diversify the calms of summer. Were her companions drugged, that they

slept through it? She took the child into bed with her, and hugged it close, as though in fear that the whirling eddies which thundered down the chimney, and made the night-lamp flicker and flare, should snatch her from her side. Was that a step upon the balcony outside—close outside their very chamber-room window? or a falling brick? or a——“Raymond, Raymond, they are breaking in the house-door!” At the top of her voice, she shrieked, while she shook her husband by the shoulder. The next instant he had leaped from the bed, and snatched something from beneath his pillow.

“Let them beware,” he cried; “their blood be upon their head.” Then pressing his left hand to his forehead, he added more calmly, “I am not myself, Mildred. Did you call?”

“They are in the house,” said she; “do you not hear them? They have torn the door off its hinges.”

“I hear the rain beating and the wind roaring, Mildred. The door must have been blown in. I must get it shut, and put up the bar, or we shall have the roof lifted off our heads.”

Putting on some garments hastily, he was about to leave the room, when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Mildred, ashy pale, and in her dressing-gown, with the still sleeping child clutched in her arms, was standing beside him, making signs that she would go too. Terror had deprived her of the power to raise her voice to the pitch necessary to make herself heard in that great tempest.

“I am not going to take the lamp with

me," cried he, smiling at the tone he was obliged to use. "Never fear, love; I shall not leave you in the dark."

But she, like one stone-deaf, only shook her head, and followed him downstairs to the little passage where the wind was pouring in like a deluge through a broken dike. The whole cottage rocked like a tree. It was not so dark but that they could see what had happened—the door was off its hinges, and was jammed back on the wrong side against the wall. Through the gap could be seen the steady light from the little Pharos above Lucky Bay; a cheering sight to Mildred, glad to feel that there were fellow-creatures there, up and about their usual task, and even counteracting to some extent the awful effects of the storm; perhaps, too, it reminded her of that Eye

which, although we may not care to look for it in fair weather, watches us always, and in the storms of Life beacons us to haven, and in the Night of Death is a star of hope.

“Hold this, dear Mildred : nay, your hand shakes ; let me leave it on this step.”

Raymond put down the thing he carried, and shouldering the wainscot, while his wife watched him from behind the angle, advanced step by step. Twice he essayed to heave the house-door into its proper position, and twice was borne back with it against the wall and bruised. The third time, taking advantage of a moment's lull, a lucid interval in the mad fury of the storm, he managed to close the door, and put the bar up. Then they went over the little house, seeing that all was safe. The

cook and housemaid were sitting up in their respective beds, with their night-caps tucked behind their ears, as though the storm was an oratorio of which they would not have missed a note upon any account, but both in tears. Mildred affected to laugh at their fears, and endeavoured to reassure them; but when she once sought her own couch it was not to sleep. A new and totally unexpected cause of apprehension had now taken possession of her mind.

Why, for the first time during their married life, did her husband sleep with a loaded pistol under his pillow? Was *he*, too, beset by a presentiment of imminent peril, or was he cognizant of some real danger, the nature of which he was concealing from her? Mildred did not dare to ask him the question, for very dread of what might be the reply.

CHAPTER V.

INTERCEPTED.

PALE and haggard from her almost sleepless night, arose Mildred Hepburn, and wrote her note in secret, and despatched it to the coast-guard station by a trusty hand. The elements which had denied her rest were now at amity. The rain was over and gone; the winds were whistling carelessly enough their favourite tune, *Over the hills and far away*; and the dark clouds, scattered and bleached, were hurrying over a bright blue sky. Even the sea wore a smile upon its lips, still white with wrath,

and strove to look as though its great green waves, which were tossing about for leagues upon their crests the fragments of men's floating homes, and, not far down, their drowned and mangled limbs, were only at play. There are storms, of course, in day-time, but the Wind loves the Night, and under her black wing more often works its malice than in the day. The sunshine, like a healthy public opinion among men, seems somewhat to restrain it. Upon this April morning, at all events, it shewed no trace of malign fury, but seemed to delight in practical jokes, such as whirling the white pigeons of Sandby Farm (which considered itself inland) in twice as many circles as their own spiral habits would have suggested, and so bewildering them with the speed thereof, that they scarcely knew themselves

from gulls; also meeting with the round hat of Mr. Walter Dickson, mariner, stuck on merely, as it seemed, by capillary attraction to the extreme back of his head, it tossed it hither and thither, and "skied" it, and rolled it, and "chivied" it, like a good-natured mob at a fair; and not like a blood-thirsty rabble, greedy for rapine and ruin, as had been its behaviour but a few hours before.

Nevertheless, these high-spirited proceedings of the zephyrs were far from relished by Mr. Dickson, not too well pleased, in the first place, with his appointment of special messenger to Mrs. Hepburn, since it involved his visiting the coast-guard station: he would have done anything in the world for *her*, and indeed he was doing even this; but it is impossible for any gentleman who

trades in lace, and owns a vessel with a false bottom, to perform with cheerfulness a service which brings him into personal contact with the guardians of the revenue. No one with any feeling would select from among all his acquaintances a notorious pickpocket, or even a receiver of stolen goods, to go on an errand for him to the sitting magistrate at Bow Street; nor would Mrs. Hepburn have employed Walter Dickson on this particular mission if she could have helped it. But, in the first place, he was her nearest neighbour, and there was no time to spare, since Mr. Stevens was expected very early; and in the next place, the objection of being connected, openly or secretly, with the contraband trade, lay against every man, woman, and child in Sandby, who looked upon French brandy and Brussels lace as

productions of their own labour, and upon a coast-guardsmen as "the interloping foreigner." The high tariff of import duties in those days was certainly an example of a Law but for which many men would have been free from sin; like the game-laws of to-day, it begat, as its immediate effects, treacheries, blood-shedding, murders, as well as indirectly producing a general lawlessness—a hatred of all laws as tyrannies. The ill-feeling thus engendered between the governed and their governors manifested itself with greatest intensity, of course, in its first stage; that is, between the actual violators of the obnoxious law, and the parties whose duty it was to uphold it. A smuggler would behave towards a coast-guardsmen as he would behave to nobody else who was his enemy. Sandby men, who had wives and

children of their own, to whom they hoped God would be merciful, by preserving to them their bread-winner, had made women widows and children orphans in that little colony at Lucky Bay before now, with but small scruple. Even on a windy night, it was not probable that a blue-jacket so used to the cliff as Robert Deans, for instance, should have been *blown over it*; which happened in January last, during a dead calm, and, by a curious coincidence, on the very night when a large cargo was known to have been run within half a mile of the spot; or even granting so much out of an abundant charity, William Boyce, another guardian of the revenue, could scarcely have dug that pit on the sea-shore for *himself*, in which he was found dead one winter's morning, with only his head above the shingle.

Nor is it to be supposed that all the cruelty was exercised upon one side. There were men at Lucky Bay ready to slash with their cutlasses upon very slight provocation, and who looked upon a Guernsey shirt as a very pretty mark for a pistol-bullet. Worst of all, perhaps, informers infested the neighbourhood, and sowed suspicion everywhere, making bad blood even, where it should have flowed most purely, in the veins of kinsmen. Writers who are not practically acquainted with troubles of this sort generally fall into the error, when describing them, of making it appear that, notwithstanding all crimes or vices which may be generated by such a state of things, the courtesies of life, the ordinary relations of man and man, go on pretty much the same as under more favourable circumstances. But this is

far from being the case. No war is carried on with that distinguished politeness which it presents in the cream-laid pages of the historian, and civil war least of all. When coast-guardsmen and smugglers met one another in the neighbourhood, incidentally and during what I may call the intervals of business, they did not give one another "good day:" and if they spoke at all, they consigned each other's eyes and limbs to everlasting perdition. Even when engaged upon a lawful calling like the present, Mr. Walter Dickson fully expected the roughest of receptions at Lucky Bay. A perceptible stiffness seizes the most affable of medical practitioners, when a homœopathist enters the same room; a county magistrate addresses a poacher, even non-officially, in tones which he generally uses towards the Canine world rather

than the Human; and I think I have seen a clergyman of the Established Church turn almost livid when brought into connection with Baptists. Similarly, Lieutenant Carey, although a most capital fellow, was by no means rose-water to the enemies of the Revenue. Moreover, as I have said, there was just now a rumour afloat of some great robbery (as *he* considered it) to be presently committed upon His Majesty's customs in those parts, and it was not wholly out of the range of probability that he might suspect Mr. Dickson of having lent his lug to the Tempter on this occasion, as he had often been known to lend his lugger.

Altogether, if commissionaires had been an institution of those times, and Mr. Dickson had happened to find one waiting for an errand in so unpromising a thorough-

fare as that between Sandby and Lucky Bay, he would have preferred to hand over the handsome guerdon which Mrs. Hepburn had given him for his trouble, as well as something out of his own pocket, to get this letter taken to Mrs. Carey by other hands. He did not, indeed, find a commissionaire, but he found Mr. Stevens, who had strolled out with a cigar (and a spy-glass) before breakfast, a quarter of a mile or so on the Sandby side of the Look-out Station. Perhaps we shall not go far wrong in supposing that from that post of espial he had seen Mr. Dickson coming, and had purposely gone forth to meet him.

“A fine fresh morning, my good fellow,” observed this gentleman carelessly. “Was there much damage done at your place by last night’s storm?”

“Not as I knows on,” replied the messenger gruffly; “but the fact is, I came away before my eyes were well open, for the wind kept me awake with blowing the shingle off my roof, and when I should have had my snooze this morning, I got this to carry to the preventive station;” and he held out the letter to Mr. Carey at arm’s-length, as a man does who has got a material grievance to expatiate upon.

“Well, as far as that goes,” rejoined the stranger, “I can save you the rest of the walk, and welcome, as I am the guest of Lieutenant Carey at present, and am going back to his house at once to breakfast.”

“Well, you see, it’s got ‘Private’ written upon it,” observed Mr. Walter Dickson indecisively; “and yet”—here he scratched his head with extraordinary vehemence—“I

have no great fancy for putting my head into that there hive yonder, even to deliver a letter, and that's the truth. But I ask your pardon, sir; perhaps you may belong to them blessed 'Bluebottles?'"

"Not *I*, my friend," rejoined the stranger laughing; "the very cigar I am smoking came to my lips free of the Custom-house. I am only here to look at some of your sea-sights—the Mermaid Cavern, and so on. I came, too, recommended by mine host of the *Crown*—" here he sank his voice, and looked cautiously about him—"which should be a passport—should it not?—to all free-traders."

"Perhaps it should, and perhaps it should not," returned the other warily. "The coast-guard station is a queer place for an honest man to put up at: the rat doesn't trust

the dog, you know, that lies in the same basket with the cat."

"And yet, if he offered the use of his teeth to carry a letter," laughed the stranger, "I should think even the most cautious of rats might accept *that* service. By all means, carry it yourself, however, if you think it right to do so, although I should have thought that the word 'Private' referred rather to the contents of the letter than to any particular hand by which it was to be delivered."

"Ay, that's true enough, master, surely; and if you're going to breakfast with the lieutenant and his wife, it's like you'll have an earlier opportunity of giving her this here than I, for them Bluebottles is sartin to keep me hanging about, and listening to their sauce, instead of taking in the letter direct."

“Very good,” observed Mr. Stevens, quietly pocketing the note; “I will see that Mrs. Carey gets it at once.”

He nodded carelessly, and turning upon his heel, sauntered back in the direction of the preventive station; while Mr. Dickson, not displeased at having been spared the most unpleasant portion of his errand, walked hastily Sandby-ways, without once looking behind him. If he had entertained any suspicion of Mr. Stevens as a letter-carrier, and had kept his eyes turned westward for a few minutes, he would have remarked that that gentleman was a considerable time emerging from the little thicket which lay between him and the Look-out. This interval was spent in a manner which few besides the late Sir James Graham could have conscientiously

commended. Nothing was easier than to untwist the little note, which had neither seal nor fastening of any kind, except that moral one conveyed by its superscription, "Private," and the contents were his own (by appropriation) in half a minute.

"DEAREST MRS. CAREY,

"Pray *beseech* the lieutenant to accompany Mr. Stevens and my husband in their walk this morning. This is a very silly request, I know; and yet I think you will grant it, even without having a reason assigned by,

Yours affectionately,

"MILDRED HEPBURN."

Mr. Stevens folded up the letter as before, and placed it in his waistcoat pocket, with

an unpleasant smile. "No, Mrs. Raymond—Hepburn," soliloquised he slowly, "I don't think that plan will suit me. Two is company—for a little way—but three is none. What a very fortunate thing that I was at the Look-out, and thereby able to anticipate your little arrangement!"

Mr. Stevens had not been the only person among the Figure-heads that morning. Early as it was, Mrs. Carey had stepped out there with the intention of telling her guest that the tea was "made," and had been an unseen witness to the interview between him and Dickson. This so greatly strengthened her suspicions of his connection with the smuggling interest, that she ventured to confide them to her husband. But from an inspector of coast-guard stations to a sort of polite Will Watch, was

too many points for the opinion of the lieutenant to veer round all in a hurry. He had only begun to admit the possibility of Mr. Stevens's not being a direct emissary of the Admiralty, when the object of their discussion appeared coming up the little garden.

“Let us see whether he mentions having seen Dickson,” said Mrs. Carey hurriedly, and the next moment their guest was seated at the breakfast-table. Not a word did he utter about any such meeting, and very little about anything else; ever and anon, Mrs. Carey shot a glance of significance at her husband, as much as to say, “Did I not tell you so;” but the conversation languished. It was felt a relief by everybody when the meal was finished, although the host had something of em-

barrassment to endure still, when Mr. Stevens observed, "Come, lieutenant, if you cannot be my companion for a longer walk, you will, at least, accompany me half-way to Sandby." And poor Mr. Carey dared not say "No," albeit he was burning to have his talk out with his spouse concerning the character and intentions of this inexplicable person; nor was Mr. Stevens satisfied even with dragging him half-way, but compelled him to accompany him to the height corresponding to the Look-out, upon the Sandby side of the bay. There, in sight of Pampas Cottage, the stranger struck his forehead theatrically. "Upon my life, Mr. Carey," cried he, "I believe I might just as well wear a turnip as this head of mine. I have clean forgotten a letter which a messenger from

Mrs. Hepburn intrusted to me this very morning to give to your wife's hands. But stay; I don't think you must open it, for you see it is marked 'Private.' I won't detain you another moment; pray, take it back at once, and make my humblest apologies; pray, do—pray, do!"

Mrs. Hepburn, watching in the little garden, had beheld with a grateful heart the appearance of the lieutenant with his guest upon the western hill-top; and her disappointment was extreme when she now saw the former shake hands with his companion with the evident intention of returning. She even beckoned to him with her hand to come on; but although he took off his hat, in token that he saw her, he only shook his head emphatically, and walked rapidly away homeward.

CHAPTER VI.

BESIDE THE BEACON.

MR. STEVENS pursued his way to Pampas Cottage, and as he waited for the servant to answer the bell, pulled out his watch somewhat ostentatiously, as though he would observe, "I am a punctual man; I trust I shall not have to wait." Mrs. Hepburn had withdrawn within doors, but he was well aware that this piece of pantomime could not be lost upon her or on anybody else who chanced to be in the downstairs' sitting-room; and when he was admitted he took his umbrella

in with him, as one who has come not to make a call, but to take a walk, and who expects to start immediately. He had his reasons for not wishing to waste time; while poor Mildred, who was quite overwhelmed by what seemed the desertion of the lieutenant, did not know that she had any interest in delaying his departure. Not five minutes elapsed, therefore, before Raymond and the stranger were climbing together the Down behind the cottage, and Mildred with her child in her arms was watching them, and fashioning with dumb white lips a prayer for her husband's safe return. At the top of the Down, he paused and turned, standing up against the horizon very distinctly. There he motioned to her a farewell, kissing his hand twice, once for her, and once for little Milly, as she well

understood it, then vanished over the brow of the hill, while her own fingers were yet upon her lips. Mr. Stevens lingered an instant behind him, and seemed to imitate her gesture, mockingly, like some malignant Spectre of the Brocken. She had promised to meet this man on the morrow at the Mermaid's Cavern, and be his guide homeward; yet she now feared nothing at his hand for herself, but everything for Raymond; and although she knew it not, she had good cause for fear.

The two men pushed swiftly on their way. There was not enough sympathy between them to make them slacken their pace for the convenience of conversation. They walked, rather, like the Alpine amateurs who walk for walking's sake, and about whom the professional guides they

employ would, I should think, be very unwilling to express their own private opinion. When, however, they came to any remarkable spot, Raymond would pause, and courteously explain to his companion whatever of interest belonged to it. Their path lay almost always close to the verge of the chalk-cliffs; but every now and then a huge cleft, riven by some convulsion of nature, or worn away by the constant action of some little river, would compel a detour. These sheltered spots, wooded for the most part to the very verge of the ribbed sea-sand, were very lovely, but in the eyes of an inhabitant of the locality, their picturesqueness had but little claim upon his regard. They were all more or less used for smuggling purposes: not a boat lying up high and dry on the shore that tem-

pestuous morning but had held at one time or another its contraband cargo—and about each there was a tale of adventure, and peril, and blood to be told, to which Mr. Stevens seemed to lend an attentive ear. The Downs themselves, with many a velvet hollow, meet for the noiseless passage of the cloud-shadows, many a tiny dingle, dotted with gorse, and shaggy with thorn, were by no means without their story. More than once, the wayfarers would come upon the “barrows,” or burial-places, of the long-forgotten dead—some rifled of their contents by brutal curiosity, but others still intact, with the same earth upon the mouldering bones which Briton or Saxon, centuries ago, had placed with pious hands above their dead. These tumuli were invariably upon some lofty ridge, as though the dying

wish of those beneath them had been to be laid within the spot from which their homes, and fields, and all the little world which they had known in life, could best be seen."

Some observation of this sort Raymond made; but his companion only shrugged his shoulders, not seeming to appreciate antiquities, or the reflections arising therefrom, so much as the tales about "Will Watch."

"What does it matter, when a man is dead," observed he roughly, "where his bones are put to?"

"Very true," replied Raymond. "Still, one has a fancy in these matters. One would not like to lie unburied, for instance, with one's bones picked by obscene birds, and whitening on a desert; or in the depths of ocean, tossing about with shell and sea-

weed, and sucked by the cold lips of toothless fish."

"You are fastidious, Mr. Hepburn," responded the stranger, hammering at the rounded turf with irreverent heel.

"If it be so to prefer land to water for a last resting-place, I am," returned Raymond. "It is, as I have said, but fancy. Still, I would like to be laid where my wife and child could come to look upon the earth which to them at least would be sacred; nay, like these ancestors of ours, I confess I would rather find my last home where all the scenes around had been familiar to me during life."

"We have not all that choice," observed Mr. Stevens coldly.

"Nice, agreeable, cheerful companion this," said Raymond to himself: "I hope he is

not going to tire himself by walking with me too far."

Almost immediately, and as though in answer to this unexpressed thought, Mr. Stevens stopped; he did not, however, hold out his hand to say Good-bye; he pointed with it to a dark object looming upon a crest of down far in advance. "Why, what is that?" he muttered. "It looks like —like a gallows!"

So haggard, so wild, and yet so menacing was the stranger's appearance as he made this inquiry, that Raymond might aptly have retorted, "And *you* look like a gallows-bird." But he only answered, smiling, "For one who has no foolish fancies such as we were speaking of but now, you seem strangely moved by Mar-mouth Beacon. It is certainly black, and

it is made of timber, but I never knew it taken for a gallows before. A beacon has stood, in some shape or another, on that promontory, which is one of the highest cliffs in the south country, for perhaps a thousand years. In the middle ages, it flashed forth its warning far and near, whenever an invader threatened; it did good service, too, when the Spaniard would have laid his yoke upon us, and told with a tongue of flame when his great Armada made the Deep yonder twinkle with myriad lights, like another heaven."

"Ay, he would have brought back the old faith," said Mr. Stevens carelessly, but with a stealthy glance at his companion.

"I am a Catholic myself," answered Raymond simply, "but I would not force my creed down a nation's throat at the point of

the sword. In these times, as during the late war, the beacon is only used as a telegraph. Those wooden arms, which give it, as you say, so ghastly an appearance, have a vocabulary, when made to speak, of many hundred words, which on a fine day can be heard, or rather read, miles and miles away."

"Are there any people stationed there to work it?" inquired the stranger.

"No, not now: the wooden hut is pulled down where the semaphore men used to live, and at present I suppose it is one of the most lonely places hereabouts. From the sea, it is totally inaccessible; the cliffs everywhere are sheer; and except by the coast-guard in their night-patrol, I doubt whether it is visited once a week by any human creature. If you would like to pass

by it, however, it will not take us much out of our way."

"I should like to do so much," replied Mr. Stevens: "I have never yet been close beside a beacon, nor even seen one before."

"Yet hereabouts they call them See'emafores," observed Hepburn laughing. The fresh, clear air, the rapid walk, had worked with Raymond's naturally healthy animalism, and put him in high spirits, which even the companionship of the sombre Mr. Stevens could not damp.

"You are pleased to be jocular, sir," responded that worthy; "in our north country, such mirth is held to be a bad sign. 'Against ill-chance,' it is said, 'men are ever merry.' We call it *fie*."

"Indeed!" responded Raymond, laughing

still. "I never knew that a poor pun was held to bring bad luck ; and yet I know the north country well, too."

"I thought you told me yesterday you were from the south," observed the stranger gravely.

"I have lived in both north and south," answered Raymond in some confusion. "Now, look at those little lumps of chalk which run to and from the Beacon, like the outlines of some children's game. Without them, the coast-guardsmen would never find his way at night ; and once some cowardly scoundrels, for whom smuggler was far too good a name, arranged them after dark so that the poor wretch, thinking that he was only upon his usual beat, fell over the cliff-top."

"And was killed, I suppose?" inquired Mr. Stevens.

“Killed!—ay; if he had had nine lives, he must have lost all before he reached the bottom. Whether a man fell from yonder edge upon sea or shingle, it would matter nothing to him by the time he reached either. See! the very rabbits in the warren there have left a space between their burrows and the hideous steep, and squat at a respectful distance. The poor victim’s name is carved somewhere upon the Beacon itself: yes, here it is—a more fitting record of his fate, perhaps, in such a place, than any other monument:

ABRAHAM PRICE—*perit*——

The date is already erased by the wind and weather, but the thing took place but a very few years ago.”

“But why *perit*?” inquired Mr. Stevens

with unwonted interest. "That is not the Latin for 'murdered,' is it?"

"Well, not exactly, I believe," laughed Raymond; "but the fact is, the crime was never brought legally home to the wretch, although the finger of justice seemed to point him out as clearly as yonder arm is pointing to you."

The stranger looked up in the direction indicated by his companion, then staggered back with his face pale as ashes. The long black arm of the telegraph was grimly covering him, as a musket covers its mark.

"Well, for a gentleman who entertains no silly fancies, I must say you are easily frightened," observed Raymond with some contempt. "Why, Marmouth Beacon is quite a scarecrow to you. I should have almost

thought you were the conscience-stricken murderer himself, but that I happen to know he has paid the forfeit of his crime. He was the very man I was telling you of who was shot through the head by Mr. Topsell, at the second 'chine' we came to. His name was Peter Elliot.—Take care where you are going to, sir, for Heaven's sake! You are standing too near the edge, unless you have a very steady eye."

"I am never giddy from physical causes," returned the stranger coolly, "although, as you have been good enough to remark, some things make me nervous. Do you mean to say that a man would have no chance for his life who fell from here into deep water, when the tide was well up—as it is now, for instance?"

"Not the very slightest," returned Ray-

mond confidently. "Where we are now, the cliff overhangs a little, and we can see nothing beneath us; but turn your eyes a few feet westward, and you may see in yonder precipice a counterpart of the sheer steep upon whose beetling edge we stand, so lofty that the roaring of the surf which, sycophant-like, licks the huge white wall it slowly undermines, cannot reach our ears; so smooth, that there is scarce a foothold save upon the ledges where the sea-gulls breed, and the foolish guillemots stand in ordered line, by scores and scores."

"Still, this very smoothness would have given the poor wretch you spoke of a greater chance; he would not at least have been dashed from rock to rock in his descent, and at the bottom there is sand, I see."

“Nay,” returned Raymond, “but you see no sand, and your mistake is a proof of the great height at which we stand. What looks like sand from here, so brown and small, is a beach of rounded stones, which would dash the life out of a man, though he fell but one quarter of this distance, while the next ebb-tide would bear him out to sea; and yet”——

“Ay, what? You were going to say something. You think a person even in such a strait might yet be saved?”

“Not so, sir; I was calling to mind how in this very spot I saw the bird-catchers at work last spring. No less than five were clinging to the face of that same precipice, with nothing but a rope of hide apiece to anchor them to life. I saw one being drawn up with a young fulmar—the

oily gull—in either hand, striking his foot against the smooth chalk, and bounding out into the very air, as though he scorned even a foothold; and all that time he was bawling jokes to his mate upon the edge here—who merely *held* the hide, like reins—upon whose strength and presence of mind his existence solely depended. Some of these adventurers do not have a mate at all, but trust to a mere stake, which they themselves drive into the earth above, and to which they fasten their rope. The only difficulty they seem to find in the matter is at the last part of their unassisted ascent, when they have to jerk themselves from the face of the precipice, in order to insert their hand beneath the rope and the cliff-edge. No accident, indeed, happens, I believe, either bird-catching or

samphire-gathering, but well has Shakspeare called it a 'dreadful trade.'

"You interest me immensely," said Mr. Stephens; "for all we know, then, there may be half a dozen folks beneath us, whose presence we know nothing about."

"No, not to-day," returned Raymond; "the wind is far too strong for—— Lord have mercy upon me! Help, man, help! Stain not your soul with murder!"

With one strong push between the shoulders, the treacherous stranger had thrust his companion over the cliff.

He had fallen, of course, but not sheer; his great muscular strength and agility had enabled him, even in that instant, to twist round with his face, and not his side, towards the precipice; and there he clung, a

few feet below the edge, with his nails dug into the soft chalk, and his feet striving for, and even attaining a momentary hold.

CHAPTER VII.

OVER THE CLIFF.

RAYMOND was well aware that the period of his existence must now be numbered by seconds, unless the heart of this treacherous ruffian should relent, whose sullen face was looking down from the cliff-top upon his dying agonies.

“There is still time, man,” he gasped, “to reach down your arm, and save a fellow-creature from death, who is not fit to die. So help me, Heaven, I will forgive, nay, bless you, if you will!”

“Forgive *me*, Raymond Clyffard!” replied

the stranger scornfully. "Nay, the debt is even still upon your side, and be sure I will exact it to the uttermost. You have found a resting-place, I see, which perhaps will last you (although, I am afraid, the nature of the chalk is friable) while you listen to what I have to say."

Hideous as was Raymond's position, closely as the mysteries of futurity were pressing upon him, yet he could not but inquire of that wicked gloating face, "What devil, then, art thou?"

"My name is Gideon Carr," returned the stranger hoarsely. Then Raymond's face grew white as the cliff to which he clung, and as damp, with the dews of the terror of death, for he knew that he could expect no mercy.

"Ay, well mayst thou groan, young Ray-

mond. It was your turn to laugh when you stole away Mildred Leigh from your brother's arms"——

"He never set you to do this," interrupted the doomed man passionately. "I am sure Rue never did."

"You are right, sir. Your brother, being a lunatic, has not the sense to plot revenge. But when you wronged *him*, you crossed the path of my sister Grace, and you had better have balked a tigress of her meal."

"But would you do murder for her sake, man? My arms are getting stiff, my fingers ache. God sees us both from yonder heaven. Ah, save me and yourself too by one good deed."

"Ay, it is but natural for one in your position to raise theological arguments," re-

turned Gideon coolly. "But for me, who am safe on the top here, I prefer to take a practical view of matters. You ask me whether I would commit what you are pleased to describe as a murder, although nobody else will take that view of it. I parted from you at yonder 'barrow,' where you expressed your intention of going by the Beacon for the sake of the view. (I was constructing this little story as we came along from that very place, and I think it will do capitally.) My last words, as I left you there, were, 'Pray, be careful of the cliff; you do walk so very near the edge, my dear Mr. Hepburn.' If your body is never found again, as you just now guaranteed would be the case, when you little thought you were talking of yourself, then I need say nothing; and I am afraid

you will suffer the inconveniences you hinted at as we came along, which result from being denied the rights of sepulture. But if your body *is* found, then there is my little story to explain your latest mischance. But I am digressing, and you have no time to spare, I'm sure. You would say, 'Why slay me for your sister's sake, since I have not injured *you*?' But you *have* injured me, Raymond Clyffard; and, like Grace, I never forgive. Long ago, she and I together made up our minds that we would have Clyffe Hall; that the Clyffards of Clyffe should die out, and the Carrs rule there in their stead. Once get you out of the way, and marry Mildred to that poor fool, your brother, and we should have him, through that girl's influence, under our thumb; he would leave his lands to the

proper persons ; and having done so, would evince—but after a decent interval, so that there might be no dispute about his testament—such evident symptoms of lunacy as to cause him to be shut up—say at the Dene, in custody of his loving relatives. A nice plan, was it not, and yet you and this minx, my niece, chose to thwart it! Ah! if you had heard the vow Grace Clyffard made upon that day you fled, it would have made your heart sink, and your cheek grow cold, even when you kissed your bride. Grace always hated you ; but when this plain-spoken, honest lad, forsooth, turned out a plotter, and a successful one, her fury well-nigh choked her. I do believe, although she loves her wealth, she would give ten thousand golden pieces to stand where I do now, watching your use-

less struggles on the verge of death. ‘Kill him!’ cried she, on the very day when we found out your whereabouts, but a few weeks ago; ‘be sure you kill him, Gideon; and if it *can* be done, let him die some dreadful death! First take her protector from her’ ”——

An involuntary shudder passed through Raymond’s frame, and into his face, wrinkled and wan as though with age, entered a new agony.

“Ho, ho! what! that pricks you, does it?” grinned his torturer. “You tremble for your dainty, fair young wife. You may safely leave her to her relatives, young sir. Is she not our niece? Do we not owe her an old score upon the mother’s account? Did not *she*, like herself, run away from our good care, and marry in

spite of us? Mrs. Hepburn is coming to the Mermaid's Cave to-morrow, she and the child too. The spring-tide rises fast, you tell me, in these parts—so fast that a stranger like myself might very well be caught by it. Nothing, indeed, could be more likely. Well, the tide *does* catch us; and after a resolute but unsuccessful attempt to rescue them—this is my second little story—I am compelled to swim away in order to save my own life. *They*, unfortunately, cannot swim. Now, you see, I have confided to you my whole programme, feeling confident that your sense of honour will prevent your revealing the particulars to any human creature. How surprisingly strong you must be in the arms, Raymond Clyffard! I had no idea that I should have a listener so long;

however, you are perceptibly slipping now. There is a curious furrow on your right, down which you will probably glide to your destination. It almost looks like a path, from here." He paused to gloat upon his helpless, hopeless victim, then continued: "Now, what would you not give, if I reached down my arms to you even now, and acknowledged that I was merely playing a practical joke? What would you not give, I say, to grasp the hand of Gideon Carr, the touch of which would at this moment be more grateful than that of any hand in Christendom, however fair, since *it* can save thee, and no other? Come, what will you bid? Will you give Clyffe? Will you make over all that would be yours, if your brother should die without a will?"

“I will give you all I have,” gasped Raymond; “but Clyffè is not mine to give—it is my child’s.”

“What! the child’s that is to die to-morrow!” cried Gideon scornfully.—“Listen to this man, foolish guillemots; rabbits of the warren, prick your ears: here is a case you will understand. What a hand at bargaining is this unhappy gentleman, who has about a second or so to live! He offers, as ransom for his life, not even the money which I have already in my pocket! The door standing wide open, he wants to haggle with one about giving up the key! It is impossible that one can treat with a person of this character. You are growing very weak indeed, Raymond Clyffard—you seem to me to be *in extremis*. Have you got any bequest to make? Your

last words will be interesting. I can answer for that at least as respects one person—namely, my sister Grace. I will send them to her by to-night's post, I promise you, with all the details of your misfortune."

"Tell her, then," said Raymond, speaking with laboured breath, "that I bequeath to her the malediction of a murdered man. You smile; but the hour will come when it will take effect. I know it as surely as I know what fate awaits me within the next few moments. May the bane of that ancient race, of whom she has been the evil star, cling to *her* as it has clung to us! May she inherit with our lands the Curse which has pursued us through so many generations!"

"Your good wishes shall be faithfully transmitted," returned Gideon mockingly;

“but I own to you they are unlikely to bear fruit. My sister Grace is the wisest woman I know, and the least likely to lose her wits like you proud foolish Clyffards. Why, look you, the Clyffards were always boastful of their genealogy, yet not one of them could count such a ‘long descent’ as is now awaiting you! I do not often joke; but upon occasions of this sort, *dulce est desipere* (one of the few phrases I ever picked up at school) *in loco*; that is to say, it is well to be merry on the brink of a precipice.”

“Thou art *fie*, Gideon Carr,” replied Raymond solemnly, though speaking with great effort. “Thou art on the brink of the precipice of Death. Well mayst thou shrink and grow pale. I tell thee, I, myself a dying man, can mark the sheet wound high

upon thy wicked limbs, the token of Black Doom that stands behind thee—close.”

Involuntarily, and with a face almost as white as that of his victim, Gideon Carr glanced over his shoulder.

The next moment he was alone.

Beneath him were the marks in the wet cliff, where the poor wretch had struggled and clung, but the failing limbs had given way during that instant, and the body had slipped down the furrow into the viewless air. Scarce a sound had until now been heard save the voices of the two men, in that unequal talk; but now, as though released from some horrible spell, the thousand sea-birds which had been sitting upon the ledges, or hovering above their nests, seemed to send forth one great cry of horror and alarm, and up they came swirling

from the abyss below, with scream on scream, and circled round in the clear blue like wreaths of snow, as though appealing to High Heaven for murder done. The silent warren shone with timorous eyes; from every burrow stared a harmless face, which ne'er till now had looked upon a crime; and what seemed worst of all, the rusty semaphore, noiseless heretofore, began to shake and creak, as the accusing winds swept by, and bade it point them out the manslayer!

Gideon Carr, to do him justice, was not one to shrink from any conflict, man to man, or even against odds; but he was by nature, like his brother, superstitious. Of religion he had none, not even that faith made up (if one may say so) of the worst part of religion, which finds divinity in hate instead of love, and clasps pale Fear in place

of roseate Hope; and looks for Night, and worse, instead of the dawning of the eternal day. He feared, as Clement said, neither God nor man. But his mind, which could see nothing in the firmament or in the ocean to suggest a Creator, entertained many a gross and vulgar article of the creed of the unlearned. To him, the future fashioned itself after the shape of a coal out of the fire; the croak of a raven would secretly fill him with forebodings, and the chatter of a jay with joy; secretly, I say, for he was ashamed of these weaknesses of his, and it was only very rarely that he betrayed to others the fact of their existence. It is also fair to add, that like most people similarly credulous, he had never been prevented by any portent from committing a bad action, or constrained by any omen to perform

a good one. When the crime was committed, however—as now—which he happened to have in hand, Gideon Carr became a prey to his superstition; and moved by he knew not what, except that it was no sting of remorse or touch of compassion, he fled from the strange sights and sounds that filled earth and air about Marmouth Beacon, and which his own act seemed to have evoked, with a fleet foot and a wet brow.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SECOND WARNING.

NOTHING, except seeing her husband return safe and sound, could have been a gladder sight to Mildred Hepburn on that fatal morning than what she did see within an hour or so of Raymond's departure—namely, the kindly sympathising face of Mrs. Carey. The lieutenant accompanied her to the cottage in the slender hope that the two pedestrians might not yet have started; but finding that they had gone, he returned to the preventive station, by no means grudging his pains, although

not without a good-humoured laugh at Mildred's foolish fears. He left a little port-manteau behind him, "which," said Mrs. Carey, "please to let me put in your room, Mildred."

"What!" replied that poor lady, attempting to be jocular, "is it something so valuable that you dare not leave it at home, but have brought it to this fastness of Pampas Cottage, garrisoned so strongly by myself and little Jane the nursemaid?"

"Well," returned Mrs. Carey, kissing her, "the fact is it's my brushes and comb, and just a few things for a couple of nights, which I have invited myself to pass with you, my dear, until Mr. Hepburn comes back again to scold you for being in such a fright about nothing."

"Oh, my dear, dear Mrs. Carey," cried

Mildred, "this is more than kind indeed. And, ah me," she involuntarily added, "how little have I deserved it at your hands!"

"Bless us, and save us!" exclaimed the honest lady, "one would think you had done me and the lieutenant some grave injury."

"And so we have," exclaimed Mildred passionately; "for to mistrust the honest, and to deceive the pure of heart, is a grievous wrong. I feel as I have never felt before—so lonely, desolate, friendless—I *must* tell you all about it, or I shall go out of my mind."

"Stay, my dear," said Mrs. Carey kindly, but placing a finger upon her friend's eager lips: "you must not do anything in a hurry, and particularly when your hus-

band is not here. I have long known—although I do not know if others suspect it—that you carry some burden about with you, deep in your loving heart. But I do not blame you for it; and unless I can help you to carry it, I do not wish to know its nature.”

“But you *can* help me, my dear and only friend. I have yearned to pour my sorrow out before you, scores and scores of times. Ah, what have I not suffered from your love and kindness! Like some imprisoned bird that sees through glass the sunshine and the trees, but feels that between him and them an invisible wall of crystal intervenes, and shuts out all—such is a secret between loving hearts. And yet—although I know my husband would not mind, for he has often told me

to tell you if I would—now I have said so much, I seem to wish I had never spoken. Things are better as they are, perhaps. It is such a sad, sad story.”

“Nay, Mildred, do not weep; come out into the cool fresh air. The open air is best for sorrow, for Dame Nature’s hand, though rough, is kindly—at least I have always found it so.”

“*You!* dear Mrs. Carey—well, dear Marion, if you will have it so—why, what can you know of sorrow?”

“Not much, thank God, my friend,” replied Mrs. Carey earnestly; “and if He seems to *you* to have been good to me, who know not what He has done for a poor orphaned, friendless girl, how much more gracious and benign should He seem to me. No, dear, as you say, I have no

sorrow; there is no room within my heart for aught but gratitude."

"And Love. I am sure that there is room for Love," said Mildred tenderly.

"Yes, dear. It would be strange, indeed, if He, who is Love's self, should have withheld that precious gift." And yet Mrs. Carey sighed. "You know, I hope, that John is dearer to me far than life; my father, husband, benefactor, friend—my all in all. A blessing for which I bless God every day. But we were never boy and girl together, like Mr. Hepburn and yourself; and when I married, I was not so young but that I—— Look you," she interrupted herself smiling, "I am like yonder Pampas grass, that has everything comfortable and snug about it, with an attendant in white marble to keep it moist

and green, but which has but little or no bud in spring-time."

"Ay, but in autumn, when the flowers fade and die," cried Mildred, "it blossoms in a hundred feathery sprays, and none of them will perish, even though they be gathered from the stalk."

"Yes, dear, I know," said Mrs. Carey quietly; "they are pleasant to have about the house (when, as you say, there are no flowers to be got), although their blossom is grey."

The two women did not speak for a little, but each held the other's hand. Then Mildred led her guest to a sheltered corner, where a seat was cut out in the cliff.

"I think I will tell you my story now," whispered she.

So hand in hand they sat, with their fair faces first in shadow, then in sunshine, then in shade again, as the morn grew to afternoon, while Mildred Clyffard told her tale from first to last.

“Am I anxious, fearful, without reason?” ended she. “Have we not cause to fear, with a foe such as this aunt of mine?”

“Much cause,” returned Mrs. Carey gravely, “and much need for friends. No harm is done at present, but I wish you had told us this before. The lieutenant”——

“What! You will not tell *him*?” cried Mildred, starting from her seat. “Oh, what will Raymond say?”

“He will say I should have no secrets from my husband,” replied the other firmly. “No, *none*, Mildred, *none*; not even that one whereof I spoke just now, and which

should have been his and mine alone, but that I saw you needed some great confidence to lure forth your own hidden woe. John would have given you helpful counsel, for, though he is trusting and simple about his own affairs, he is both wise and keen when acting for others."

"He could not picture a woman like my aunt," said Mildred with a shudder; "no one could, who does not know her—so relentless of purpose, so unscrupulous in means, and actuated by such deadly hate."

"Ay," returned Mrs. Carey, musing, "to be foiled by her whom she had thought her own instrument—that must have been wormwood to such a one as you describe. A woman that knows nor shame nor fear, is dangerous indeed. Yet—you

seem to dread some physical harm—is it possible that she would incur the risk of”——

“To gain her end,” interrupted Mildred, solemnly, “Grace Clyffard would dare the gallows.”

“Nevertheless, you have done wrong, and very wrong,” pursued Mrs. Carey, “to hide yourselves away, and so to let her know you fear her.”

“It was I,” said Mildred, in low and broken tones. “My husband would have defied her to the teeth. But I—I know her so well.”

“Poor child—poor child!” cried Mrs. Carey, tenderly. “This woman has done you harm enough already: to have inspired such terror should be a sufficient triumph to the most malignant. And yet, if you lived

under your own names, and were known to all about you, and if your aunt was known to wish you ill, it would not be risk she would be running, did she work you harm, but the certainty of detection: the blow she aimed at you would scarcely fall before the arm would be pointed out that struck it. But now, if you had not told me this to-day, why, your husband, your child, yourself, might be involved in some sudden catastrophe, the clue of which it would not be possible for us to discover. I do not wish to terrify you, Mildred, but I do think that you have taken the very means—— Hark! did you not hear the garden wicket go?"

"I did," gasped Mildred, starting up, and running into the cottage, at the back of which was the arbour in which they had

been sitting—"I did; and little Milly is playing in the garden all alone."

Mrs. Carey followed, not without some undefined apprehension, which set her orderly pulses beating thick and fast. The visitor, however, was no one more formidable than a curly-headed youth, who called occasionally both at the Cottage and Lucky Bay, bringing with him fresh eggs and other delicacies from Westportown. This afternoon, however, he was without his basket, and bore in its place a large leathern bag, suspended from his shoulders.

"Please, ma'am, the letter-carrier have been took ill this morning," observed he grinning, "and I'm a-doing postman for him; only, what with driving here and there, and then back again, because of missing somebody out, and likewise the horse being dead-

beat, I'm afraid I'm rather late. Here's a letter for Mr. Hepburn, ma'am, and that's all." And off trotted the deputy-deliverer of His Majesty's mails.

"A bill from Westportown, I suppose," said Mildred, scrutinising the somewhat hieroglyphical address; "and yet does not this word in the corner look to you like *Immediate*, Mrs. Carey?"

"It is as like as the writer can make it," returned that lady, confidently. "How unfortunate that your husband did not get it before his departure!"

"Perhaps I had better open it," said Mildred; "something may have to be done at once. I hope it is not from Marmouth about his boat, or he may have taken his journey for—— Great Heaven, what is this?"

‘Bewair of the man calling himself Stevens, who loges, I believe, with the coast-guard.

‘YOUR WELL-WISHER AS BEFORE.’

And Raymond has gone with him alone,” cried Mildred passionately. “I shall never see his bright and glorious face again!”

It was terrible to see how the light faded out of her own features as she spoke, and how the large and lustrous eyes lost all their light, as the note fell from her nerveless hand, and fluttered to the ground.

Mrs. Carey picked it up, and scanned it closely. “Never be frightened by an anonymous letter, Mildred; it is almost always the weapon of the base and cowardly. Suppose this Stevens is an honest man after all.”

"No," replied Mildred with a shudder, "I will not suppose that. Dame Nature, whom you praised just now, has told me otherwise too plainly."

"Still, man to man, your husband is more than a match for him."

"Yes, but unsuspecting"——

"Nay, not so, Mildred," interrupted the other; "look you, 'your well-wisher *as before*.' This is not, then, the first warning your husband has received."

"True, true; and that explains why he now sleeps with a loaded pistol beneath his pillow. I would that he had taken his weapon with him this unhappy day."

"Stay, Mildred; there is need of judgment here; there must be no rash leaping to conclusions. You do not know what schemes, what treacheries, are ever working about us,

born of this wretched smuggling. I do not think it, of course—let me not offend you by what I say—but has your husband any connection with those who call themselves Freetraders? I do not ask you to betray him; whatever you tell me, shall be held as secret as the grave. I know there are many persons, otherwise honest, who have dealings with these people. If this man Stevens is, as my husband thinks, an officer of the government, this warning may have well been sent to Mr. Hepburn in case he be concerned”——

“No, no,” sighed Mildred hopelessly; “I wish it were as you suggest; his life, at least, would then not be in peril. We are good friends enough with all in Sandby, but we have no dealings with the law-breakers.”

“Nevertheless,” quoth Mrs. Carey, “I should like to see that first letter to which this present one seems to refer. It is almost certain to be more explicit, and from it we might gather at least from what quarter to expect the danger. I will wait here while you search for it, and try to shape some course to follow, if things should be as you fear, and this warning date from Clyffe.”

“We have very few possessions,” returned Mildred with a sad smile, “and no hiding-places that I am aware of. If Raymond has not taken the letter with him, I shall find it in five minutes.”

It was well that Mrs. Carey’s woman’s instinct had suffered her friend to make that search alone. Truly, it was no extensive one, but somehow everything of Ray-

mond's had acquired in those few hours of absence a sort of dearness which made her linger over each with reverent hands, and grudge that any but her own should touch them. There was a picture of herself in their little drawing-room; but, lo! she now found another, drawn by him, her lord, in pencil, and, by the date, before he had been her declared lover, and with it a certain rosebud, dead and withered, which she had given him at his request, before her heart had learned to leap at his footfall; along with these was one little lock of Milly's hair—a very history, in brief, of his love for her from dawn to mellow noon: true records, fading to the eye, but to the heart fresh as the sundew, fragrant as the May. Then in a drawer, his “secret drawer” he used to call it, but the spring

was broken some days back, through making it leap out to please the child, she found the thing she sought, and would have rather found an adder coiled.

“Beware, Raymond Clyffard. The cat’s eyes have found you out at last; find another hoal for a little; and at once. There is danger lurking at your very door.”

“A TRUE WELL-WISHER.”

And straightway, when she read these words, the things that were her Raymond’s seemed in Mildred’s misty eyes not only dear, but sacred—sacred as the farewell breathed from a mother’s lips on one who sails for alien climes to dwell there, and who cannot hope to see again on earth that tearworn face, now tortured by its love, that smiled upon him in his cradle—sacred as the last words

of a dying man, who points to his orphaned child at play among her toys, and whispers, "Thou wilt not forsake her, friend; thou art fellow-guardian of her now with God himself;" for Death seemed shadowed forth on that poor scrawl, as certainly to her who read it, as though it were a tombstone telling, "Here Raymond lies;" and by that Awful Hand all things are consecrated, no matter how common, with which our loved and lost have had to do.

No weeds could have made Mildred Clyfard look more widowed, than when, with her white face all drawn and gaunt, she sank down on her knees beside her husband's vacant pillow; and there, while she strove to pray for Mercy, Mercy came, and numbed her pain with swoon.

CHAPTER IX.

BY THE SHORT CUT.

“**H**ERE is your child, my dear, here is little Milly; will you not kiss your child?” were the first words which Mildred heard upon recovering her grief-stricken senses. It was Mrs. Carey that uttered them, who had lifted her upon the bed, and was sitting patiently beside it with the little girl in her arms. She laid her precious burden down by the mother’s side, and let the round large eyes of the infant do their gracious work.

“I have read that letter, dear,” said she,

“and I do not augur so ill from it as you do.”

Mildred groaned, and put up her hand to hide the torture of her face.

“If this Mr. Stevens intended any evil to your husband, it is clear he would not have come home.”

“Come home!” cried Mildred, starting from the pillow with the look of one who, shipwrecked in the tropic seas, beholds from his lonely raft some succouring sail: “Raymond come home?”

“No, love, not Raymond.”

The rounded arm on which the listener leaned gave sudden way, and with one long-drawn moan, the head sank back upon the pillow.

“But this Stevens has come back, for I have seen him, and even spoken with him.

He called here just after you left me on the lawn, and very much surprised he seemed to be at seeing me here. However, that he has returned, instead of taking to flight, as he might easily have done, convinces me that at present no mischief has occurred. And if these warning letters be genuine, we are now forewarned."

"What did this man say?" asked Mildred, with eyes tight shut, as though to keep out some hideous vision.

"He said your husband bade him look in here on his way back, to remind you that you should be at the Mermaid Cavern by three o'clock to-morrow at latest, if Milly is to see the sea-flowers. Mr. Hepburn and he parted company, he said, on Marmouth Down by the Saxon Barrows."

"Ay, at the grave-side," said Mildred

hoarsely. "And now he thirsts for this little life and mine."

"If you have any such foolish fancy, Mildred, you should not go to meet this man."

"What? disobey my husband's last command? No, my friend; I go to-morrow as he bids me."

"Then I go with you, Mildred, that is certain: nay, but I *do*. You are rather obstinate, my dear, yourself just now; but compared with *me*, when I have made up my mind to anything, you are Docility personified—ask John else. I am not afraid on my own account or yours; but if we have Milly with us, I shall take one of our men from Lucky Bay to help to carry her, if we tire."

"True friend in need!" cried Mildred;

“my mind seems feeble as my limbs. I cannot think at all, but only suffer. Yet cannot the road be searched where this man went with Raymond, and the—the cliff?”

“That has been done, dear. One of the coast-guard followed them this morning, directly I got your letter. He met Mr. Stevens returning, very near the spot where he says he parted with your husband, and then went on as far as (by the time) the the two could possibly have gone together, a mile beyond the beacon, but there was no trace of anything wrong.”

“Thanks, thanks, dear Marion; I have no right to despair, having a friend like you. This little one, too; yes, you are right, she shall not go with us to-morrow.”

“That’s a wise woman ! Now Mildred is like herself again. But one whole day, and you will have your husband back, I promise you ; and in the meantime, fear not this man at all. The lieutenant has had a word from me, and will watch the man as a cat watches a mouse. My husband’s honest heart takes all he does not know for good ; but being warned, his hand is like a vice to grip the wicked. Woe, bitter woe to him who plots against an unprotected woman and her child beneath John Carey’s eyes ! This Stevens is a very bold and crafty villain, you would say ; but he with whom he has now to deal is keen, although not cunning ; and as for boldness, I do indeed believe my husband would, in his shirt-sleeves—in the cause of honour or duty—defy a lion.”

Mrs. Carey laughed, but while she spoke, the fire of honest pride glowed in her cheeks and eyes, and made her pleasant face one glory.

“So, Mildred, without being very brave ourselves, we may rest to-night without fear. Come, you must have some tea, and then to bed; and this young lady, too, must be persuaded to retire, since such late hours are bad for her complexion.”

I think unto the house of sorrow there is no human blessing equal to a breezy-minded woman, tender at heart, but chary of her tears, ready to listen to woe, but not to flatter it, and, Martha-like, careful to fulfil the ordinary duties of the house, whatever earthquake may have shaken the pillars of its peace.

The night passed, thanks to Mrs. Carey,

without alarms; and when the next day, at noon, the two friends set forth upon the inland way which led by a short cut to the cliffs above the Mermaid Cavern, the clouds of evil foreboding had thinned, so that a little sunshine straggled through, and found its way to Mildred's heart. It was a lovely walk; the fields, with garments various and rich, were welcoming everywhere the presence of the Spring; the woods had donned their beautiful green robes, and all the incense-breathing earth was bright and glad. Now their road lay through lanes with lofty banks, by nature's lavish hand set thick with flowers, and where overhead the pale sprays of hawthorn upon either side strove hard to kiss; and now it climbed some hill-top, from whence many a mile of pleasant English ground, with hall and

hamlet, church tower and low white farm, wooed their willing eyes.

“This is the third time,” said Mildred apprehensively, when they had gone a considerable distance, “that looking back I have perceived that man yonder; he pretends to be gathering violets whenever we turn round, but I do not like his following us in that manner. When we pass Mr. Jasper’s farm, we will step in, and then he must needs miss us.”

“Pooh, pooh, my dear; do not flatter yourself that the gentleman is so interested in our proceedings,” said Mrs. Carey, laughing; “see, he has deserted us already, and has taken that path across the fields.”

“I am heartily glad of it, Marion; for now that you have put me in better hope

about dear Raymond, I am ashamed to say I begin to be alarmed about ourselves. I almost wish that we had got that escort with us you proposed, in case of our having brought little Milly."

More lanes, more hills, more beauties on all sides; and now the banks decrease, and become mere rounds of green, and the road dwindles to a turf-track, and presently is lost upon the boundless down. Now, too, the thunder of the unseen sea breaks in upon the inland harmonies, and the scented air grows fresh. "We are very late, dear Mildred; we must not tarry now; it is long past three."

These words of Mrs. Carey referred to a disinclination evinced by her companion to arrive at their destination; a scared and hare-like look had once more taken posses-

sion of her, as though she beheld some object of fear behind and about her.

“Did you not hear some sound like a human voice, Marion?”

“Yes, love; our west winds are full of such cries,” returned Mrs. Carey, coolly.

“When I first came to live in these parts, I used often to open our bed-room window, both before and after the gales, under the impression that some one lay outside in pain. The sea, too, is getting very loud; I think it must be near mid tide.”

“But we were to be at the cavern long before that, were we not?”

“Yes, if we took Milly to see it; but not otherwise. Why should we trouble to descend the cliff, and then toil up again? We have only to guide Mr. Stevens home. He cannot mistake the only path that leads

hither from the shore, and when he has got up, he cannot fail"—

"There he is!" interrupted Mildred, hastily. "How my heart beats—how my knees tremble! But why is he lying down?"

"That is not him," returned Mrs. Carey, confidently; "it is a larger man even than he."

"Yes, great Heaven!" cried Mildred; "it is the very person who has been tracking us all the way, and who pretended to take the path across the fields. Marion, my friend, we are betrayed, and it is I who have led you into the snare. May Heaven and you forgive me! Your husband never will, I know."

"I think he will," rejoined the lieutenant's wife, laughing "for that is Robert Andrews, one of his own men. I did not feel so

brave as you did about this expedition at starting, so I begged to have a bodyguard, in case we wanted one. It was I who beckoned him, behind your back, to take the field-path, and so get here before us. You are not vexed, are you, Mildred?"

"I am grateful beyond all that words can say," answered Mildred, fervently.

At a sign from Mrs. Carey, the man arose, and came forward to meet them.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Stevens?" inquired she. "Is it possible that he could have missed us after coming up the cliff?"

"Quite impossible, ma'am. If your head can stand looking over here, you will see that yonder is the only path up from the bay; and, except at low tide, one cannot get round either point. The cavern lies

almost underneath us. If he had come up here on the Down, we must have seen him: there is no shelter except that very lane as you came by."

"But the tide has now risen quite high, Robert, and he cannot possibly be in the cavern."

"Not unless he be a merman, ma'am," assented Andrews, grinning and touching his hat, as though in apology for joking before his superior. "My own belief is as the gentleman got sea-sick, and was landed a good way short of this. He may be back at Sandby, or even Lucky Bay, by this time."

"Back at Sandby!" cried Mildred with clasped hands; "then he may even now be at the cottage! Home, home, for Heaven's sake! Why did I ever leave my child?"

With that she turned, and began to re-

trace her steps, without waiting to hear what comfort the lieutenant's wife was endeavouring to find for her. Moreover, Mrs. Carey's face belied her cheering words; it was pale and full of apprehension; and after one more glance at the insatiable sea, which had already devoured the shore, and was sucking with greedy lips the cliff itself, she hastened after her friend.

CHAPTER X.

THE EMPTY HOME.

THE road which the two ladies had taken from Sandby to the Down above the Mermaid's Cavern, although a short cut in comparison with that along the cliff-top, was several miles in length, and as Mildred fled back along it now, it seemed as though it would never end. Her eyes were blind to its beauties, or if they were observed, it was only as landmarks to calculate how much of the tedious way still stretched before her. She could not listen to aught that the affection of Mrs. Carey, or the honest sympa-

thy of Robert Andrews, prompted each to say. Her thoughts had sped on with her heart, before her, to the Cottage and its precious treasure she had left unguarded there, deeming that she herself was standing between it and him who coveted it. She felt like some out-manœuvred chieftain, who, having set forth with his forces to offer battle, learns that the foe has got between him and the fenceless town where the women and children have been left, and by forced marches, hastens back, fearing unutterable things; and as, to his anxious eyes, it is something to see the town yet standing yonder, and not a mere heap of smoking ruins, so, when she first caught sight of her little home, tranquil and fair as ever, with the blue smoke from the kitchen chimney streaming in the wind (the pennant that shows that Commodore

Comfort is aboard), and all its windows open to the sun, her white lips moved, although they did not speak to mortal ear, and with one long sigh she dismissed half her sorrow.

“I suppose Milly is in the kitchen, begging for plums,” said Mildred to her friend, like one whose thoughts need endorsement; “cook always spoils the darling. Why do you not speak, Marion?”

“I was looking at that white thing on the roof; at the little window of the attic: there is somebody waving a handkerchief.”

“Yes, so there is. That is Jane’s bedroom; she is dressing, and the child is with her, doubtless; she is making a sign of welcome to us—that is all.”

The mother’s tremulous voice sorted ill with her confident words, and Mrs. Carey

did not reply. As they drew nearer, they heard Jane calling, "Let me out—let me out, ma'am; he has locked me in."

Without interrogating her further, the two women ran upstairs, and found the attic door locked against them. "He has taken the key away," sobbed the poor nursemaid from within, "and you must burst it in."

"Come up here, Robert Andrews," cried the lieutenant's wife. "Can you break this door open at once, without a crowbar?"

"Ees, ma'am, I rather think I can," returned the coast-guardsmen, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Stand back, young ooman, within there, if *you* please."

Then raising his foot—that earliest battering-ram in the long roll of warlike instruments—he brought it down with accuracy upon the simple lock: away flew staple and

screw heads, as though a petard had been applied to the spot, and behold Little Jane, sitting on her own bed in tears, with twopence-halfpenny tight clasped in one hand, and her pocket-handkerchief in the other!

“I couldn’t ’elp it, ma’am,” sobbed she; “indeed, indeed, I could not. Who would have thought of any harm in a horgin-grinder, with moving himages all round and round, and one of ’em a-playing on the pianna! And poor dear little Milly so pleased—I felt quite obligated to give him what I could spare; and I ran up here for the money, leaving that precious darling dancing with delight, and he pretending to be so kind; and he must have followed me with his shoes off, for I never heerd nothin’ till he locked the door upon me, and then went down and carried off that beautifullest

child! Oh! 'ave you seen anything of her, and *can* you forgive me, though it ain't my fault, ma'am, it ain't, it ain't indeed?"

"When did the man take my child away, girl?" asked Mrs. Hepburn, hoarsely.

"Oh, nigh two hours ago, ma'am. You see, cook she went down to Sandby after some s'rimps—or leastways after George Brown, for it's no use telling fibs in a time like this—and I and little Milly, we was left quite alone; and while we was playing in the garden, who should come over the hill from Lucky Bay but this here man with the music, and little folks dancing in front of it—such a sight as I never before seed! And when he had inveigled me here, and locked me in, I watched him with the little darling on his shoulder, still so proud and pleased, taking the road across the

Downs to Westportown; but though I screamed and hollered, and squoze my head out at the little window, and very nearly never got it back again, not a soul heard me till I see you coming home to where there was no Milly."

The poor girl rocked herself in such an agony of distress as no reproaches could heighten. Mrs. Hepburn did not attempt to reproach her. "I was thanking God for *this*, Marion," whispered she, in hollow tones.

"God is never thanked in vain, Mildred," returned Mrs. Carey, gravely.—"Now, do not cry, Jane," added she, addressing the still sobbing girl, "but answer my questions truthfully and sensibly; thereby you will be doing what you can to repair the mischief which has happened. Did you ever, to your recollection, see this organ-man before?"

“Never, never, never!” answered the girl, hysterically.

“You do not think it possible that it could even be anybody you have seen before, in disguise; not, for instance, the man who called here yesterday and spoke to me upon the lawn—that Mr. Stevens?”

“I did not see the gentleman, not to remember him, ma’am; but this was a tall, big man, with a cruel face (though I didn’t think so at the time), and he had grey eyes and grizzled hair.”

“That is enough,” said Mrs. Carey, thoughtfully.

“Ay, and more than enough,” groaned the wretched mother. “My Milly has been in his power these two hours.”

“Yes, but he has the organ to carry, and the child as well,” reasoned the lieu-

tenant's wife. "Do you, Robert, take the road to Westportown, and try to come up with this villain. Pursue him, no matter whither he has gone. Give my husband's card to the chief constable, and tell him to spare no pains. Here is my purse. Ten precious minutes have been lost already."

She had scarcely ceased to speak ere the willing giant was upon his way.

Mildred had sunk down on the floor, and, huddled together like some poor wretch who feels the teeth of the frost, there she sat shivering. She was neither weak nor witless; but she saw in what had happened the corroboration of her worst suspicions; and as the partridge cowers while the hawk is in the air, so she shrank beneath this unmistakable work of the relentless hand of her aunt Grace. Mrs. Carey dared not

leave her in such a plight (for the nurse-girl was worse than useless), nor, had she done so, could help have been obtained nearer than Lucky Bay. Nobody at Sandby would have done the bidding of the lieutenant's wife, or even listened to her, so bitter was the feeling in the hamlet against the coast-guard and all connected with it. So the three sat where they were, only that ever and anon Mrs. Carey went to the little window, and looked forth in hopes of seeing the figure of Robert Andrews, or some messenger of his, upon the westward road; but she saw nothing but the line of silver birches, thin and bowed, and the wild waste of down, and beyond, the ebbing sea and broadening sand. Once only she whispered to the girl, "Did Milly go with this man willingly?"

“Oh, yes, ma’am, quite; and though of course it was the dancing figures which mainly pleased her, yet the poor dear child seemed to take a fancy to him from the first.”

“That is very strange,” mused Mrs. Carey.

After many a weary hour, the coast-guardsmen returned. He had been unable to overtake the child-stealer; but the constables were on the alert, and the alarm had been given far and wide. The organ, with the figures in front of it, which had been so fatally attractive to the stolen girl, had been found in a ditch scarce half a mile away.

Mildred listened to what he had to say, without the blank despair upon her face taking any impress. She had expected no

better news, and worse could scarce have been brought to her. Later in the evening, as they sat in the little parlour without lights, since Mrs. Carey averred that she could knit without them, and the gloom was dear to Mildred in her grief, there entered the truant cook. "Having a few hours' leisure," explained she, "she had imprudently taken a sail with Mr. Brown in the *Good Intent*, and the wind, though favouring them in going out, had been so contrary when coming back, that they had been delayed thus long; also, when they did land, she had received such news as had quite "turned her," and she had been obliged to"—

"We know all that," interrupted Mrs. Carey sharply, and making an imperious sign that she should leave the room. Then, after a few minutes, she herself arose, and

going into the kitchen, said, "Your mistress thought you were about to speak just now of her poor child's being stolen; but if there is any new misfortune, tell it me. Heaven forbid that you have any bad tidings about Mr. Hepburn."

"No, ma'am not about him."

With a great sigh of relief, Mrs. Carey listened to the narration of this domestic, discursive, egotistical, didactic, as it is the manner of her class to be, and more especially when they are conscious of being in disgrace, as though they would hide their error in a very mist of words.

Having heard all, she returned to her childless friend.

"Am I not right, dear Mildred, in supposing that of this bitter draught you have to drain, the bitterest drop is this, that the

man Stevens, against whom you have been warned, and against whom Nature herself has warned you, should be the"——

"Yes, that my Milly should be in *his* clutches, above all men, that seems worst of all," cried the hapless mother. "No other could be half so cruel; no other ever frightened my lost darling by his very looks before."

"Ay, so I thought, my love. Now, Milly was not frightened at *this* man, who seemed to have a kind way with him, according to Jane's story. I thought that that had in it some seeds of hope; and now I have just heard"——

"What? what?" cried Mildred, clasping her feverish hands.

"Something that makes it quite impossible that the man who stole your Milly *could* be Stevens."

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE CUTTER.

UPON the same morning that the two ladies started on the expedition above described, Mr. Stevens took his departure for the same place in the coast-guard cutter, but several hours earlier. The cutter was on its return to Marmouth, and it was arranged by the lieutenant that his guest should be disembarked in Mermaid Bay, where the Cavern was situated, as near the time of low tide as might be, there to remain until Mrs. Hepburn, or some other person in default of her, acquainted with

the short cut homeward, should join him. To return to Lucky Bay, or even Sandby, by the cliff-top was a very long round (including the whole of the walk taken by Mr. Stevens and his victim the previous day); and the sea-passage, of course, was longer still. Moreover, the boat could seldom come near the shore in consequence of the reefs and rocks. The cutter, however, had a fair wind for her voyage, and sped along at a great pace, all on one side, as is the manner of such fast-sailing craft, and shewing her very keel to the sun, as a flirt shows her ankle. Nor, I regret to say, was Mr. Stevens sea-sick. Upon that churning sea, with its patent double action of toss and roll, where most landsmen would have lost both heart and stomach, this gentleman sat as unmoved as though he

possessed neither, and swept the land with a telescope lent him by the boatswain. Was it not well understood that he was there to see the beauties of nature, the conformation of the chalk-cliffs, and the interesting habits of the sea-fowl? The crew had orders to give him the fullest information, and to afford him the best opportunities of observing whatever was most curious. Under these circumstances, they were rather surprised, as they approached the cliffs beneath Marmouth Beacon, which are notoriously the finest on the south coast, that Mr. Stevens seemed to take but little interest in them, and, on the contrary, expressed a wish that the cutter should at that very point make a circuit round the Dutchwoman, an isolated rock of considerable size, but no great beauty.

True, it was peopled by legions of sea-birds, whose proceedings were most varied and extraordinary; some of the whitest, like undergraduates in their surplices, just returned from chapel to an unfinished wine-party, seemed never to be able sufficiently to express their satisfaction, as Mr. Stevens and his friend drew near; others, on the contrary, with uplifted beak and wing, gave utterance to the most vigorous protests against such an infringement of the laws of trespass; the island was theirs, they contended, "theirs, theirs, theirs," and even the water within forty fathoms of the place was private property; "it was shameful, it was disgraceful, and no bird worthy of the name of *Larus Marinus* should put up with it for a moment." Some of these feathered sticklers for their rights so grievously

exhausted themselves by their deprecatory statements, that they had to retire a while apart into certain holes of the rock for rest, or to partake, perhaps, of some marine medicament for the recovery of the voice, and in the meantime confined themselves to scrutinising the strangers with suspicion, and shaking their heads. The young people, who presented the appearance of solid thistle-down—little round balls of feathers—exhibited in their tremulous flappers, in their straining necks, and in their gaping mouths, such astonishment as only the young are capable of. The solemn guillemots sat all of a row upon the ledges, coming to no decision upon the matter whatever, but like the *noblesse* in revolution time, gradually increased by new accessions to their conclave, until the space grew insufficient for

them, and the original members were toppled off croaking feebly. As for the cormorants, they never ceased to take their "sensation headers," one after the other, like patriots who, perceiving their native soil is about to be violated by the foot of the foe, determine that there is nothing for it but suicide.

The foot of no foe, however, not even that of a bird-catcher, had ever been placed upon the brawny shoulders of the Dutchwoman; sheer and smooth she rose for many a yard from the deep blue sea, before the jutting ledges commenced which led like inverted stairs to the crown of the rock, upon which grew some scanty herbage. Ages ago, perhaps, ere the island had been divorced from the land, some four-footed creature might have pastured on it; but

henceforward, while the world lasted, neither sheep nor kine would crop a mouthful there. The cliffs, too, were green with samphire, doomed to grow there unpickled to the end of time; otherwise, the mighty rock was without a trace of vegetation, and in its inaccessible isolation looked unspeakably stern and lone.

“There’s just as many birds, sir, in those cliffs yonder, and they are as steep as this, and three times as high,” observed the cockswain, who had had enough of the Dutchwoman, and did not much relish the voyage home being lengthened by any more *detours* to examine islands, of which there was quite an archipelago yet to come.

“I know it,” replied Mr. Stevens, quietly, “and we will keep in-shore for the future;

but I can see the Beacon cliffs very well from here, through your telescope."

"Do you see a very steep place, just under the Beacon, sir—for I can't myself without the glass—where the chalk projects all the way down so as to form a sort of shoot?"

Mr. Stevens, as it so happened, was attentively regarding the very spot thus indicated, but he replied carelessly that all the cliffs seemed much alike to him.

"Nay, but the place I mean is steeper than most," persisted the cockswain, "and, as it seems to me, who lost a friend there, like one great grave-stone. He was pushed over the top by a smuggler chap: a murdered man, sir. If you'll hand me my glass, I'll find the place out for you in a moment—— Why, bless my soul,

sir, you've dropped it in the water; it's one of Dolland's best—a fifteen-guinea one: who the devil am I to look to for making it good?"

"To *me*," returned Mr. Stevens coolly, producing a well-stuffed leather purse. "It was exceedingly careless of me; but that cormorant came up so close to me from his long dive, that he startled me out of my senses. You shall be no loser, my man; and while I am paying my debts, let me add a couple of sovereigns, that my friends here may have the wherewithal to drink my health at Marmouth. I can scarcely make myself heard: what an infernal noise and clangour these birds do make!"

"Yes, sir; I am sure if we could have made them quiet, we should have done it for you, a most liberal gentleman, I'm

sure; but they do say the laughing-gulls only give themselves one hour's rest in the twenty-four, and, for my part, I've never had the luck to hit it; and they're just as noisy yonder on the mainland as they are here."

"Well, then, let's give 'em a wide berth for the present, for they have fairly dazed me with their clamour," replied the stranger: "the colony does not extend much beyond the Beacon Head, I believe."

"No, sir; they're very partial in their breeding haunts. If I steer out to sea for the next five minutes, and keep well off the headland, you will be no more annoyed by their chattering. If it wasn't for their young uns, one would think that all gulls was females."

Whether the ear of Mr. Stevens was

really so delicate as to suffer from the dissonance of sea-fowl or not, it was clear that he was seriously annoyed by something. He lay back in the stern-sheets, frowning heavily, and without speaking, and ever and anon he shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked back through his fingers, as through a closed visor, at the long white line of cliffs the cutter was fast leaving behind it.

Thus he remained lost in his own meditations, and only dreamily conscious of where he was, or what people about him were saying, when suddenly the cockswain nudged him, "Do you see that speck of white, sir, yonder?"

"No, no!" cried Mr. Stevens, leaping to his feet as though he were on dry land, and thereby nearly falling overboard; "it's

nothing. Keep her out, I say.—I beg your pardon,” added he, perceiving that they were by this time far out to sea; “you startled me from an ugly dream. What was it you were saying?”

“I merely wanted to draw your attention, sir, to that white thing yonder gliding under the white cliff; you would scarcely think it to be a boat, I daresay, but it is one. That’s Walter Dickson’s craft, the cunning thief. It is almost impossible to see her, painted white as she is, when she’s sailing between us and the chalk; and yet, since he caught sight of us, look you how she hugs the land! I’ll wager she has been to Marmouth for no good. Nobody but a dare-devil chap like Dickson would venture so close in-shore, with such a sea on; you may take your oath he has contraband goods on board.”

"Fire on her! sink her! run her down!" exclaimed Mr. Stevens excitedly. "Why do you let the villain escape?"

"Well, we must keep on the right side of the law, you see. Nobody ought to know that better than you, sir, I fancy—asking your pardon for the liberty—for it strikes me you have worn the anchor buttons: one of ourselves, sir, only a deal higher up the tree," added the cockswain, touching his cap.

"I will bear you harmless if you will stop that boat," replied the stranger passionately. "I will give you fifty pounds if you catch her before she rounds the headland. Put the helm about, I say, and cut her off."

But the cockswain showed no inclination to obey. "Lor bless you, sir, we'd be glad

to do it for half the money, and indeed for nothing at all, since you would take the risk; but it ain't no manner of use. The *Saucy Sall* runs three feet to our two. She'll be at Sandby, with the wind against her, a'most as quick as we were coming with the ebb and all. And, by the by, the tide is on the turn by this, and you will have less time, since we have steered out so far, for seeing the Mermaid's Cavern, than you had calculated upon. However, we'll land you just beyond the point there, and we shall come in view of the bay in a very few minutes. 'Tis the prettiest sight to be seen in all these parts, to my mind."

CHAPTER XII.

WAITING FOR THE PREY.

THE cockswain was right, although not particularly happy in his adjective. There is not a more glorious sight in all the coast-scenery of Britain than Mermaid Bay. There are grander scenes, perhaps scenes more beautiful, but none excel it for a combination of the beautiful and the grand. It cannot be viewed from above to any advantage, because the cliffs are sheer, except in one spot, where a zigzag path leads to the lofty Down; but from the sea and from the beach it is beheld

under circumstances equally favourable, though totally different in character. Approaching the bay from seaward, as in the present case, a crescent of chalk cliffs formed the background of a picture in which everything for that reason stood out as if in relief. Immense masses of outlying fragments still bid defiance to the waves, which furiously beat against them, and then, as if maddened by their resistance, thundered white-lipped on, and wore the cliff itself into a hundred caverns. At one point in particular it seemed as though the charging host of waves had used some strategy, whereby the precipice had been pierced in more than one place, and a junction of its watery foes had been effected far within it. Sooner or later, the tall cliff for many a yard was doomed, thus undermined, to fall; and on

its face, the oblique layers and rows of flint—nature's own hieroglyphic—shewed like Belshazzar's warning. Small use it was to set those mighty warders, clothed in white, to break the advancing columns, when with every tide the enemy forced its way into the very heart of the citadel, and sapped the lessening pillars at their base, and tore the weakened walls.

The outlook from the extremity of this natural excavation was beautiful exceedingly. Left and right, the light streamed in under rugged archways, each making a framework for the picture of the sparkling bay. In the one, the waste of waters stretched unbroken till it met the sky; in the other, a line of jagged cliffs, about two furlongs from the land, rose sheer as an iceberg, and pierced, like it, in weird and fantastic

forms. But what was to be seen within the cavern itself was even still more curious and beautiful, for the sunrays, broken and intersected by a thousand shadows, shone upon walls of rainbow hues, such as no colourist could rival; panellings of the brown barnacle, "picked out" with scarlet and yellow sponges, and dotted as the firmament with stars by innumerable sea-anemones of richest tint.* Amethyst and ruby, garnet and eme-

* A curious illustration of the blindness of our forefathers to natural beauties is exhibited in the following account of the sea-anemone, extracted from an old English magazine, and headed "Singular Animal Flower Found in 1764:" "The inhabitants of St. Lucia have discovered an animal flower. In a cavern of that isle near the sea is a large basin, from 12 to 15 feet deep, the water of which is very brackish, and the bottom composed of rocks, from whence at all times proceed certain substances, which present at first sight beautiful flowers, of a bright shining colour,

rald, all were there, standing out like bosses on a shield; but instead of being a stone, each was a soft and yielding substance, fresh as a flower, and bright with a brightness that only life itself can yield. The ceiling of this treasure-house of nature was equally gorgeous; but the floor was of softest sand,

and pretty nearly resembling our marigolds, only that their tint is more lively. On examining this substance closely, there appears in the middle of the disc four brown filaments resembling spiders' legs, which move round a kind of yellow petal with a pretty brisk spontaneous motion. These legs reunite pinchers to seize their prey; and the yellow petals immediately close to shut up that prey, so that it cannot escape. Under this appearance of a flower is a brown stalk, of the thickness of a raven's quill, and which appears to be the body of some animal." By the above, it would seem that only one hundred years ago was this creature discovered, whose extraordinary beauties the caves of ocean probably exhibited thousands of years ago as lavishly as now—but it was the pre-Gossean era.

and doubtless often printed by the twinkling feet of the sea-fairies, after whom the place was named the "Mermaid's Cavern."

A few times only in the year, at very low spring-tides, were mortals admitted within this exquisite chamber, and then only for a very little while. Summer and winter, day and night, its beauties were hidden beneath the unconscious wave, to which, nevertheless, they owed their brightness and their bloom, but gladdening who shall say what eyes?

Even on this occasion, the most opportune in all the year, there were but two hours between the time that the last reluctant wave left the silver fringe of the floor of the cave, and when the first notes of the great ocean-organ should again begin to haunt its echoing walls; and as the

keel of the cutter clove the yielding sand to land its passenger—

“If you stay with the mermaids, sir, beyond an hour and twenty minutes,” was the cockswain’s warning, “you will not leave their company without wet feet.”

Then one leaped into the sea, and pushing the boat into deep water, climbed himself within it, and the sail filled once more, and lessened, and was lost, as the man Stevens watched it from the land.

With an evil glance up at the zig-zag path, and a smothered oath at woman’s tardiness, he sat down on the narrow beach, and drawing a letter from his pocket, read the contents slowly to himself. “She’s wrong,” he said, slapping the paper—“she’s quite wrong there.—*When you have made sure of R.*—Well, I *have* done that. It can-

not be but that he is dead. I myself saw his dying look; an ugly sight, that haunts me still. I was a fool just now for shewing—— It must have been what folks call conscience, I suppose; but I *did* see it—saw it as plain as I see this letter. I must get rid of all such nonsense, for I have a worse job in hand than that of yesterday.—*When you have made sure of R., do not risk more at present. M. will be useful to us, and, indeed, almost indispensable. I can only calm R. C. by promising that she shall still be his, as indeed she may be, if all has gone well. He is obstinate as a mule, and mad as the maddest, unless this lure is dangled before his eyes. Again I say do not risk more with M.; and as for the child, it will be invaluable. We will find means to bring*

it hither, and then its foolish mother will follow, I warrant, as a dam follows its lamb. Do not think me a milksop, nor that I forget my debts and yours; they will be all paid in time. But again I say, when you have made sure of R., risk nothing more at present.—I do risk nothing,” soliloquised Gideon Carr impatiently. “This business I have now in hand is a certainty. Never again is it possible that such an opportunity will occur for killing *both* birds with one stone. Rupert Clyffard will then be left without kith or kin.—*Mad as the maddest,* she says.—I doubt it not; but I think I know a way to persuade even madmen to do what I will. If his fingers have joints in them, they shall write the words I dictate; or, at all events, sign his name in the right place on the parchment. How

strange it seems that Grace and I, who have made so many sane folks appear mad, should now be striving to shew this madman sane! I daresay Clement takes credit to himself for this, and calls it reparation. Poor superstitious fool! However, most of us have our hours of weakness, or at least our moments—as I had mine a while ago. It must have been some touch of—what do they call it? Remorse; ay; some mawkishness which I myself knew not was within me, that caused me to think I saw through that man's glass—what?—pshaw! the thing must be a score of miles away by this time—half-way between the shingle and the foam; just as he said he would not have it be: of all fates, that the worst, he said—to welter on, unburied, in the boundless seas. I am sorry that I dropped

that telescope. If the man *had* looked, what then? There was nothing for him to see; and nothing for that Dickson neither. I was a fool; and now am I a fool to stand here on the open beach, and let yon fellows see that I care nothing for this Mermaid's Cavern, which I have come so far to explore."

He walked to the nearest opening, and looked in. "A dainty place for any lady of the *land*, not being a mermaid," muttered he with a grim smile, "to die in. What a soft silver couch! What splendid hangings, and how rich the roof! Somewhat low, i' faith, but else how could one see the jewels? Would they were precious stones indeed, and that I alone knew of this Aladdin's cave! Why, it would almost be worth while to adopt Cle-

ment's plan, who means, it seems, when he gets rich enough, to become pious, good—to make investments in the way of charity, which may repay him in the other world. Methinks the interest should be high indeed, where the security is so problematical.—Why does not this woman come? She *will* come, I feel certain: that fictitious message from her husband, reminding her not to fail, was an excellent thought: she is a good wife, and she will come.” He paused a little, then broke forth, as if in a passion, “Why should she have thrust herself between my ends and me? Why have refused the man we chose for her? Why married him, of all men in the world most hateful to us? True, she is our niece, but for that very reason, she should have done our bidding. No, curse her; she shall die! Will she bring

the child herself, I wonder, or will there be the nursemaid? Or will that woman, the lieutenant's wife, who is now staying at her house, come with her?—that slow-speaking, demure hostess of mine, who, I can well see, entertains no favour for Mr. Stevens. I trust she may; there is room for all three to drown in here—the tide will choke a dozen as easily as one. It is a question of five minutes, more or less, with anybody; that is all. Mildred is tallest, and will be the survivor of her child and friend. —Ah! what fine crabs are here! Why, there's not a stone but roasts its tenant. That's what they talked of in the cutter, as we came along; but I was thinking of —I mean I was playing the fool. Well, these side-long gentry will have some pretty pickings ere the day is out. How late their

guests are, who will also be their suppers! They will scarcely arrive here dryshod; if they see me standing without, that will be an excuse for them not to enter. They will merely beckon me up the cliff, and beckoning will not serve my turn; therefore, I shall stay within here.—Come, Mr. Crab, thou art so very large, that I have a desire to kill thee.”

This he said as one of the creatures stretched a mailed arm from under a huge rock (for with great rocks, bearded with trailing weed, the sand was strewn), and then withdrew it suddenly, as though its hard projecting eye had seen some danger. “Come, friend, come out of thy hole.”

He laid his strong hands on the rock, and strove with might and main to turn it over; but it did but move in its damp

setting a hair's-breadth. Thus foiled in his first plan, and angry at being foiled, Gideon Carr made another attempt to gain his end. He knelt down, and scratched the sand away with both his hands, as a terrier scratches at the burrow of a rabbit; but when he had made a considerable hole, he desisted, "for," muttered he, "she will take it for a grave, perchance, as indeed it looks like one. But, nevertheless, this crab will I have." The hole was small; but he bared his brawny arm, and lying down within the hollow he had made, thrust it into the very shoulder. The fingers reached that he sought, but as he grasped it, the crab in its turn, with its toothed claw, seized them like a rack and vice in one. For one instant, the man felt faint with agony, but rage soon conquered pain. "When

I get out, my friend in armour," muttered he, "although I shall have no time to take you home to boil, I will drive wedges into these claws of yours (a thing which I'm told you do not like), and leave you to die, without supping like the rest upon certain dainty fare. Yes, you will come, notwithstanding that you struggle, and are so very large and strong;" and, indeed, huge as the creature was, the giant strength of Gideon Carr was dragging it forth, and had brought it almost to the very mouth of its dwelling, when suddenly the huge stone itself, undermined by the previous digging, and shaken by the present contest, toppled and fell forward—only a few inches, but within them was included Gideon's naked wrist, on which it pressed like a new world on Atlas. Taken even

at this frightful disadvantage, the man could still, perhaps, have wrenched out his maimed limb, but for the tenacity of the crab, which held on to him more resolutely than ever; his closed fist forming with the creature itself a sort of solid knot, which it was impossible to withdraw through the now narrowed aperture.

For the first time in his long life—in view at least of any material danger—the damps of fear gathered upon the brow of Gideon Carr. The frightful thought: What if this creature holds me till the tide comes up and drowns me! sped with a sharp agony through his brain. But straightway he became himself again; resolute, indomitable, calm. Without motion—for was not every moment now a loss of priceless strength?—he lay, calculating his

chances. She would surely come, this Mildred for whom he had been waiting so long, but not until now, impatiently. He had felt quite certain of her coming, a minute ago or so, when he was free and out of all danger; then why should he doubt now? His own misadventure could not have altered *her* plans. No; she must needs come. He would set her to dig at the sand about his wrist, and then, when he was loose—yes, he would drown her still. He was not like Clement to cry, “Ye powers of good, if ye will help me now I will henceforth serve you.” Why, was it not through this woman’s tardiness—curse her!—that he was now lying humbled and racked with pain? There was no bone, however, broken—he knew that; nothing to prevent his swimming away

when the time came. But suppose she could not free him with all her efforts. Then he would hold her there, and they should drown together. Ay, but they should. There should be no lying stories of righteous retribution, forsooth, told about Gideon Carr. As he had lived, implacable, unbelieving, defiant, so would he—— But pshaw! why think of death? He should not, *could* not die! Were all his mighty plans for the future to be scattered by a paltry creature that was sold in the market for sixpence? Was Clyffe Hall to be plucked from his grasp for ever, and tens of thousands of pounds to be lost—for if he did not get them, were they not lost?—and thirst for vengeance not to be slaked after all, but only whetted? For what was Raymond's death? He had

written to Grace last night, *The first step of the road you think so perilous has been taken. R. C. is gone.*—The first step! And was it, could it be fated that he was not to take a second? Fated! that word, though unformed by his lips, sent a tremor throughout his frame. What had the fool Raymond meant in his last agony by saying that he saw the winding-sheet bound high about him, the token of black doom immediately impending? Doubtless a last malicious effort to give him discomfort—that was all.—Ha! the rustling of a dress, and that of more than one! They are coming at last; the more the better, for the time is getting short, and the——Gideon Carr did not conclude that thought, but groaning, passed his disengaged arm for the second time across his

forehead. It was no rustle of a dress which he had heard, but the echo of the first sibilating wave as it swept the sandy threshold of the Mermaid's Cavern; yes, that herald of the rising spring-tide had given its fatal warning; by that he knew, although he could not turn to see it, that the rim of beach was now no longer visible: then, for a moment, his iron heart gave way, and a shrill scream of terror broke from his labouring lungs. Such a sound—the inarticulate confession of defeat—they had never sent forth before, and even now he did not appeal to Heaven, nor yet to Man.

The coast-guardsmen sitting lazily upon the cliff above was startled by it, and looked out sharply for the strange sea-bird that had uttered so harsh a note; and Mrs.

Hepburn heard it on the Down beyond, and asked her friend what sound it was, who told her it was but the west wind. If he had repeated it—but no voice could have framed a second time a cry so terrible, the concentrated anguish of a hopeless heart—perhaps help might have come. No woman could possibly have released him from his position, but the strong arm of Robert Andrews might have done it. Even as it was, unaided, this imprisoned wretch, made frenzied by his peril, heaved up the rock by a tremendous effort some quarter of an inch, so that he saw the creature that was his gaoler; then back the mighty mass sank down, and pinioned him as closely as before.

And now, when he knew that his own efforts must be unavailing, a curious change

came over him: he had never—that is to say, within the last ten minutes, in which his whole life seemed to have been comprised—he had never felt so confident of rescue. Mildred would come, of course, and seeing the tide up, would conclude that an accident had occurred—that he had had a fit, or sprained an ankle, and would hasten down at once, for what was getting her feet wet in comparison with saving a fellow-creature's life? That was the way the woman would reason; doubtless, she must be positively certain he was *there*. She must have seen the cutter that brought him pass by Sandby. Where else *could* he be? And had not her husband told her—— Once more the guilty wretch shuddered from head to heel, for as his thoughts touched on Raymond, an icy hand was laid upon his limbs, as though a

corpse had clasped them. Up, up it crept, and with it a stealthy sound. The tide had reached his feet, and higher yet. Though the floor of the cavern sloped upward, his very mouth was only a little higher than his feet, as there he lay; nay, the hollow of the sand which his own hands had dug, would cause him to drown more quickly. He had said that it looked like a grave, but never dreamt that his own form would fill it. He had jested of a few inches more or less making all the difference as to survivorship in such a case as this, and now, thus prostrate, he was doomed to drown sooner than any child of two years old. He remarked for the first time that the cavern was growing dark, and that a greenish tinge was mixed with what light there was; and turning as well as he could, he saw

the two approaches to the place half filled with the rising tide, and only a jagged crescent of blue sky above it. Even while he looked, a tall, white crested wave hissed in, and swept him to the very neck, and dashed his face with spray. The freshness of the foam seemed to revive him; and with a gleam of hope in his worn and anguished face, but with a cruel look upon it too, even though the coming pain was to be his own, he drew forth a clasp-knife from his pocket; then dragging it open with his teeth, he began to saw the blade against the sinews of his captive wrist. He would escape still, ay, that he would. What was a hand more or less compared with life? If he had but thought of this a little earlier; but even now it was not too late. A mighty wave here whelmed him from foot to head. "Too late, too

late!" it echoed, thundering in. "Too late, too late!" the screaming beach replied, dragged down by its return. Blinded by the salt water, Gideon could not find the place to aim at, but like an inexperienced woodman, cut and knocked the limb at random. Then another wave swept in, and roamed about the cave at leisure, and fell back upon him from the splendid roof and wall; and then another, and another, thundering Doom!

CHAPTER XIII.

DESOLATE.

“**H**OW shall I tell Raymond when he comes home?” was the thought which now occupied poor Mildred’s mind, whenever it was not dwelling upon her lost Millie’s fate. “How shall I find words to let him know that we are desolate, nay, worse than desolate, for that is what we say when Death has snatched our darlings only to give them to God!” The agony of the mother was the more insupportable, since she was forced to remain inactive—since nothing could be done, save what already had

been done. She could not take coach to Clyffe, and cry to the wolfish woman there, "You have stolen my lamb." Well convinced as she was that such was the case, she had not a particle of proof to support the accusation. It was useless to inform the police of the true state of the case, since that would enable them to take no further steps at present. When the actual stealer of the child should be tracked and secured, then, indeed, some blow might be struck at her who had set him on. But, at present, there was nothing for it but to wait and weep. Perhaps, when Raymond came, he might suggest some course of action, and yet the terror of having to tell him, "Our Milly is stolen," so weighed down her soul that she scarce wished him back. It would have almost been a relief to her, in

her lonely anguish, if he had sent a messenger from Marmouth to say, "My business keeps me here a while." In the interim, perhaps, the robber might be captured, the child restored; or Aunt Grace herself might relent. No, that was impossible. Even if she could have heard of her niece's agony, of the desolation she had wrought in hearth and heart, of the utter wreck of that humble little household, which she had effected as by the lightning's stroke, no touch of pity would have moved her; of that Mildred was as sure as of her loss itself. Hope she felt still; on which, indeed, alone she fed, through which alone she lived, and did not wither suddenly like a flower beneath the pall of the first snow—but not in her aunt's mercy. No, it was the thought of that hard, vengeful woman, which, more

than all, made her dread her husband's coming. But when Raymond did not come, nor any messenger to tell her wherefore, and the third evening of his absence was thickening into night, then she began to feel that the uttermost depths of wretchedness had not been sounded even yet.

Terrible, indeed, are the weapons which God sometimes uses, or, in his inexplicable wisdom, suffers to be used against his creatures for their good. Inexhaustible is the armoury of His tremendous will. "The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away, blessed be his name," is a wise saying; but let no human mourner venture to add—He can now take away no more; He has done his worst, or what seems to be his worst, when in truth all is good.

The arrows of his wrath have darkened

our sun, but the night of our sorrow has still, perhaps, some moon of comfort. What, then, if the flight of His chastening darts continue yet, and darken *it* also, until all indeed is night! The shield of Resignation is sometimes raised in vain—or what seems in vain, to our poor, impatient, ignorant, fretful spirit, with its “How long, how long?”—and, smitten through and through, we lie prostrate in the dust, and still are smitten. Then, what was sorrow before becomes almost joy by contrast with the more dismal present, as one who, from inner gloom, looks forth on some late-traversed dusky way, and wonders how, with those glimmering stars above it, it ever could have seemed so dark.

Thus, no sooner did the shadow of her coming widowhood begin to steal over poor

child-bereft Mildred, than all her former woe seemed almost light; she no longer feared her husband's arrival, but waited for it eagerly, and at first hopefully; then yearned for it as never bride longed for bridegroom; then prayed for it, as for some blessed boon, almost beyond the power of Heaven to grant; and still her husband came not. Mildred had heard from Mrs. Carey of the frightful fate of the man Stevens; of how one of the Sandby fishermen had gone to the Mermaid's Cave for crabs at the next low tide, and found the drowned man still imprisoned like another Milo by the pitiless stone, with his wrist half cut through, and the knife still clasped in his other hand. Directly she heard the news, a shudder had run through her frame, not upon his account alone who had

thus perished, but because she also seemed to see a retribution in it for some crime at present undivulged—the finger of the Avenger pointing to another fatal catastrophe, in which Raymond's own life might be involved. And when, after a little, news arrived that he had never reached Marmouth, never got to the end of the journey begun with his dread companion, then, indeed—her husband murdered, and her helpless child in the power of her bitterest foe—it seemed that there was no new sorrow, as no joy, left in the world for Mildred. In vain Mrs. Carey besought her to leave her own desolate home, and remove to “Lucky Bay,” out of reach of further hurt.

“No,” answered she, with bitterness; “lest my slain Raymond's spirit, wandering hither, should seek for me in vain; or lest, when

Grace deems it time to smite, that of my murdered Millie should return, and wail for me about the desolate home which is the only one she knew. While as to further hurt, my friend," continued she, "I would thank this aunt of mine to send and slay me, as the most welcome revenge she can take."

If friendship and genuine sympathy could have mitigated such woes as Mildred's, there were many that would have gladly helped to bear them. Coastguard and smugglers for the first time united in a common object—in striving to bring her comfort. If the stealer of her child had fallen into the hands of either party, it would have gone hard with him indeed. The lieutenant was quite a changed man; all merriment and good-nature had left his eyes; like a

knight-errant under a vow of vengeance, who abjures feast and tourney, and even puts in abeyance his fealty to his own sovereign lady, so did Lieutenant Carey forsake pipe and glass, and even his duty to his fair mistress the Revenue, and scoured the country night and day, and by land and sea, in Mrs. Hepburn's cause. Every yard of cliff, and particularly the Beacon Cliff, about which suspicions had been excited by Stevens's behaviour in the cutter, was examined by his own eyes, from his own boat; every foot of ground traversed by Raymond along the down-land on that fatal day was gone over with the carefulness of a sleuth-hound. His men, too, whose hearts had been won by Raymond's generosity and friendly bearing, worked in the same cause with [a will; nor, as I

have said, were the free-traders backward in shewing their sympathy for the widowed and childless lady, although they evinced it in a very strange manner.

They would not permit the body of Stevens to lie by the side of their own dead in the little churchyard. In vain were they told that they had no right to charge the poor wretch with a crime which it was not even proved had been committed at all. In vain was the drowned man interred with all decency by clergyman and clerk. They dug him up, again and again, and cast his dishonoured limbs upon the wayside stones, until it was found necessary to remove them to a distant locality. Walter Dickson, whose boat had visited the Beacon Cliffs so immediately after Stevens had exhibited such an inexplicable

dread of them, had come up himself to Pampas Cottage, and assured poor Mildred, with a profusion of the strongest expressions in his vocabulary, that it was out of possibility that any person could have been pushed over the cliff in that part, without leaving, to a practised eye like his (to which, moreover, the place was known as well as the palm of his own hand), some trace of his fall. The evident desire of the man to give some comfort, so moved Mrs. Carey, who was present, that she rose up and shook both the free-trader's hands. "But you see it is no use, my man," she whispered, pointing to Mildred's hopeless face; "and even if you could give her hope, it would be a mistaken kindness. Nevertheless, I owe you a good turn for this, Walter Dickson, and will

repay it you, if it should ever be in my power."

"Bless your kind honest face!" returned the smuggler, with a curious sort of struggle in his own weather-beaten features. "If ever a coast-guardsmen does go to heaven, it will be your husband, who has got an angel for his wife, to shew him the way. Perhaps it is as you say, and nothing as I can tell this poor lady can do her good; but if she was to take the good book to my old woman this evening, as she has often done afore, who is down and abed with the rheumatics, and nothing to think upon except the boys we lost at sea, older than this poor child (whom, please God, we shall see again) and therefore worse to part with, she might maybe forget for a little this sad trouble of her

own in—— There, if she ain't gone to put on her bonnet and shawl already! We won't keep her from your company—that is, my old woman won't—not half an hour. She'll read, it is likely, just a chapter out of Job, something as teaches folk to put up with everything; although Job, I warrant—and saving your presence, Mrs. Carey—never knew what it was to be troubled with the Excise."

Whether it was the act of a good Catholic to read the sacred volume in the vulgar tongue to a female heretic, deservedly suffering from the rheumatics, was a question with which, I fear, Mildred Clyfard did not concern herself, although she was probably the first of her name who had ever committed mortal sin in that particular. Perhaps the Church forgave her

in consideration of her ignorance and her good intentions. But certainly, upon her return—which did not take place nearly so soon as Mr. Walter Dickson had specified—she did not present the appearance of one who had incurred grave spiritual penalties. On the contrary, the consolation which she had administered she also seemed to have partaken of, and that so largely, that Mrs. Carey could not restrain an ejaculation of joyful surprise. “You have heard some good news, dear Mildred. I am sure you have,” exclaimed she excitedly.

“I have nothing new to tell you, Marion, but only the corroboration of something you said the other day; but which I, Heaven forgive me! was too hard of heart to acknowledge. You told me then

that God was never thanked in vain. Within these few minutes, I have found, my friend, that that is a true saying; but please do not ask me any questions."

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED INVITATION.

I CANNOT think that the postman, in this my district, W., who deals out Birth and Death, and Happiness and Misery, and Ruin and Competence, every morning of his life, save Sundays, to one or other of his fellow-creatures, does ever himself receive a letter; otherwise, he could not surely go about his work with such methodical impassibility. I have watched him taking his morning round—the one which is the most big with fate, since little comes by the afternoon post except bills and invitations—

I have often watched him, I say, distributing his momentous missives, and not a feature alters, whether he hands in the blackbordered envelope, which the fingers of the recipients do not venture to open, but hold it in their trembling grasp, while the lips murmur a silent prayer; or the scented *billet-doux*, which the lover tears asunder in his haste, but the maiden hides in her bosom till she shall be alone. Nothing interests him except a registered letter, at which (notwithstanding that he must know it brings its welcome with it) he grumbles and repines, because he has to wait while we sign our name. At Christmas, though he must know that those enormous oblongs he brings are bills, he has not so much as an "I'm sorry for you ;" and an underlined "Immediate," in red ink, which sets tingling

all the blood in one's body, does not afflict him nearly so much as a trifle of insufficient postage, without being reimbursed for which, he is quite prepared to take the urgent document away again unopened: he doesn't care tuppence—yes, he *does* care exactly tuppence, and that's all. Upon Valentine's Day, indeed, he *may* shew some signs of human sympathy, but that is a mere conventional and passing enthusiasm, and one which is incidental to his profession.

Now, the country postman is a very different person from this red and blue automaton of the town, and does not hold himself so high above human affairs. *Homo est.* He is a letter-carrier, and he considers nothing which letters contain to be beyond his sympathy, or out of his beat. If you

want to get acquainted with a country neighbourhood, I know of no better plan than that of accompanying the postman in one of his morning rounds. What an interest he takes in the letter for Widow Chareall, the hardworking, honest soul, who comes out of the cottage and down to the garden gate with her bare arms, damp from the washing-tub, and her three chubby children hanging about her skirts, and who thinks it must be a mistake, for who, alack! is there left to write to her *now*, and, indeed, for the matter of that, who ever *did* write, for her poor dear John was no scholar. But the postman assures her that for her it is, and for no other, and lingers whilst she breaks the seal, and learns with genuine pleasure that a bit of money, it seems, is coming to her, about which John

always used to talk with a certain vague hope.

Then away by the short cut through the park, where the deer do not raise their heads at the sound of his well-known foot-fall on the path, nor the hares at their morning toilet mistake for a moment his letter-wallet for a game-bag; and so by the range of stables to the back door of the Hall, where, if the footman is not in the way, the cook relieves him of the Hall bag, which she unlocks with her floury fingers, sets aside these for master, those for missus, and that on foreign paper for the eldest young lady with a grin, which our peripatetic friend reciprocates, for does he not know all about her engagement to the young soldier-officer in the Indies?

At the Manor Farm, again, he has a friendly chat with the guidwife, whose hus-

band is away at the cattle-show in town, and who takes counsel with him as to the propriety of opening that letter with the Westportown postmark, which she feels certain is about the heifer, and ought to be seen to at once; but finally decides to abide by his advice, and to "let it be," particularly since Mr. Leasehold is so very singular in the respect of "never thinking anything can be properly seen to except by hisself." He is not in such a hurry, is the country postman—although *between* his stoppages, mind you, he steps out with such vigour that conversation is rendered well-nigh impossible—but that he has a cheery word for all he meets; and when he approaches the house of sorrow, such as Pampas Cottage, he finds time to remember to omit to wind his horn; and when the lady of the house, in deepest

mourning, herself steps forth to meet him, his voice has something in it which expresses his sympathy.

Thus it happened, at least, with the postman from Westportown—just recovered from his late ailment, and therefore perhaps more full of the milk of human kindness than usual, upon a certain morning which I have in my mind. Mr. Hepburn had stood by him upon a certain occasion when he had been wrongfully accused to his superiors by old Frumps, Lord Absentee's agent and bailiff, of having kept back some letter for twenty-four hours, in order to save himself trouble in the delivery thereof; nor were Christmas boxes neglected at Pampas Cottage, nor was the offer of a glass of ale in inclement weather altogether unprecedented at that hospitable little house.

“I have two letters for you, ma’am, this morning,” observed he respectfully—“one on ’em franked.” And if ever a face added, “And I trust it may bring you some comfort in your trouble, dear lady,” it was the face of that genial postman. This good fellow was well aware that he was speaking to one whose husband had been mysteriously snatched away but a few days before, and whose child had been as strangely stolen from her; but yet he deemed that a letter which was franked by a nobleman, and bore a seal with a large coat of arms upon it, must needs contain consolation. The other missive had by no means an aristocratic appearance. In the pre-envelope epoch, it was not so easy to turn out a neat-looking note as now, and the individual who had folded this particular document had either possessed

a very indifferent eye for rectangles, or had accomplished this matter ingeniously (but still not well) with his feet instead of his hands: it had a number of those dirty creases upon it, each of which, like a wrinkle on the human brow, tells of failure and disappointment; and when all had been done and undone of which foolscap is capable, the wafer had been evidently too lavishly moistened, and then hammered down with a penny. And yet, without even a glance at its more imposing companion, it was upon this homely epistle that the eye of Mrs. Hepburn rested with anxious welcome.

“Thank you,” said she, and while the man still lingered—“thank you, and good day;” but she never took her eyes off that straggling superscription, which might easily have been accomplished, like the folding, by a

tolerably plastic foot, and which was spattered all over with ink to an extent inconceivable by those who have not witnessed the modern method of transferring ferns to dinner-doileys.

“It is the same handwriting,” murmured she, “which warned me truly that—of my poor husband’s fate. It can have no worse terrors for me now. What, then, if it offer some crumb of comfort! Perhaps about my Milly!”

Reader, have you ever had a letter in your hand directed to yourself, and only waiting the touch of your thumb and finger, which yet you dared not open? A poor farthing’s worth of paper, with a little writing within it, which you have no more ventured to unfold without some preparation, thought or spoken, of the heart, than

one of the Wandering Race would have ventured to break irreverently into the Holy of Holies. If so, you may remember that, notwithstanding your faith in Heaven's mercy, you delayed that supreme moment again and again, and even endeavoured perhaps meanwhile to interest yourself in matters of little moment—in the children playing in the street, or in sparrows fighting for a straw. Thus was it with Mildred Hepburn, as, with that pregnant missive in her hand, she turned her attention to its fellow-letter, expecting to find in it, she knew not, cared not what, but something that might help her to put off for a few moments longer the plucking of the fruit of that dread knowledge-tree. But no sooner had her eyes lit upon the handwriting, than, with an inarticulate cry of

hate and pain, she ran towards the house, exclaiming, "Marion, Marion!"

Mrs. Carey, who had been watching her from the window, was by her side in a moment.

"See!" exclaimed the wretched woman, "this is the writing of Grace Clyffard. Not content with gloating over the ruin she has wrought, she must needs write to tell me that it is her work. Yes, I tell you Yes; you do not know her yet, nor what her revenge is like. It would not seem to her to be complete unless she wrote: 'Niece Mildred, I am even with you now. That was my hand which struck you, through those you loved.'"

"If she writes that," said Mrs. Carey, gravely, "she acknowledges a crime, and incurs the punishment."

“Ay, true,” gasped Mildred. “Her cunning is as great as is her hate—she has let me know it, then, by some less direct means—that is all. Take it—take it: it chills my blood to touch the paper over which the snake has trailed! What is it that she says? What cruel gibes? What subtle stabs? What lies? But no, I care not what she says. She cannot harm me worse by wicked deeds; why, then, should I let her wound my ears with her barbed words!”

Mrs. Carey took the letter, opened it, and read it slowly to herself. “It is most audacious, barbarous, and base,” groaned she. “She hints, I fear, that Milly is at Clyffe”——

“Then let me hear,” interrupted Mildred, passionately. “Nay, I will be calm, dear Marion. Please to read it out. One likes

to know about one's dear ones—even how they die. What news is there of my little unprotected darling in the she-wolf's den?"

"Even she-wolves, as one reads, have sometimes been kind to babes," returned Mrs. Carey, soothingly. "I cannot think that any bearing the name of woman would harm a child like yours."

But Mildred only shook her head, and signed that she should read the letter out.

"NIECE MILDRED,—*I think that I have now no cause to owe you any grudge. However great may have been an insult in the first place, when the duel has been fought, the combatants, although in nowise friends, need be no longer enemies. They may even act together when their interests happen to be in*

common, which chances to be our own case. It is of importance to me that you should come at once to Clyffe. You will have nothing to fear in so doing, either from hate or love. My wrath is quite burned out; while, as for Rupert, he is ill, poor fellow, and needs a sick-nurse more than ever. If the ties of relationship and your own natural benevolence do not move you to accept this invitation, we are not without another little attraction, or what I believe to be such. But this shall be a secret till you come."

"Ay, she holds my child," groaned Mildred, as Marion ended; "and, as I have seen boys who have robbed an ousel's nest, carry home its young, and place them where the mother may hear their cries, and so herself be captured through her

own loving instincts, so does this aunt of mine bait her felt trap for me with my very flesh and blood. Well, what then? I care not for myself what happens to me; and if I see my Milly once again"——

"Mildred Clyffard," interrupted Mrs. Carey solemnly, "the thing which we do in our despair is rarely right. Moreover, there is scarcely anything the doing of which affects ourselves only, and no other. While you live and are free, your child has a friend to avenge, if not to protect her, and to protect by the menace of avenging. This woman feels this, and therefore desires to get you into her power. She has made a mistake, as I think, in writing this letter. Her wrath has outrun her prudence, and carried her within reach of the law. There

is much to explain in this, and which will have to be explained before judge and jury. —But what is that other letter which you hold in your hand?”

“I had almost forgotten it,” answered Mildred, sighing, “although, before I recognised Grace Clyffard’s hand, it seemed of urgent moment. It is from him who warned us of the man Stevens. You may read it also, if you please. There is nothing to be warned of now, and, alas, nothing to be told that is good tidings.”

“But this is very strange,” said Mrs. Carey. “Look you, the postmark is the same with that borne by the letter from your aunt. Why, *this* comes from Clyffe Hall likewise!”

Certainly, at the top of the page were scrolled those words above the date, which

was the same as in Mrs. Clyffard's communication. The rest of its contents were as follow :

Widowed, but not yet childless woman, my heart bleeds for you. I have done what I could hitherto, and I have failed. Nevertheless, let me at least preserve what is remaining to you. Mrs. Clyffard will presently ask you to come hither, relying on your love for your child, who, indeed, is here, safe and well. You will doubtless suspect a snair, as is only natural, but if it be a snair, it is for herself that Grace Clyffard has set it. Come hither, and fear not. The unknown friend who watches now over your child will then watch over you also. It is true I have warned you in vain, but, as you have bitterly learned, not without there

having been need of warning. I beseech you, put faith in me this time. If, by cutting off my own hand, I could have saved your husband's life, I would have done so, as God is my judge; nor in this do I boast, since the murderer Stevens (for he WAS the murderer) would have done as much, if he could, to have saved his worthless self. That man was Gideon Carr; the most dangerous of the foes who menace you and yours is therefore dead. You can count the rest upon three fingers—Grace, Clement Carr, and the man Cator. They are all here, but I am here also. Come, then, without fear.

“YOUR WELL-WISHER.”

With downcast head, and hands clasped as if in prayer, Mrs. Hepburn listened

patiently, as penitent before a priest, only at the word "murderer" a shiver seized her limbs as takes the poplar when its leaves turn pale before the bitter East. When all was read, she took the letter from Mrs. Carey's hand, and kissed it.

"I have faith in this man," quoth she, "who has taken pity upon the widow and the fatherless."

"What! and yet you have never seen him, nor can even guess who he is?" cried the lieutenant's wife.

"Yes," said Mildred firmly. "Is not that the very definition of true faith? This is no pretence or stratagem, I am sure. It never could have entered Grace's heart, with all its cunning, to snare me thus. There is no approach to that for any good, not even in seeming."

“But how strange, Mildred, that you can make no guess at who this friend may be; for kindness, not like that warmth which makes the quicksilver to mount the tube, unconscious of what sort of heat it be, whether from sun or fire, sets the heart at once inquiring from whence the genial glow proceeds that has so moved it. Friend recognises friend, no matter under what disguise he does his loving service. All love you here, dear Mildred, to the humblest. Have you, then, left none at Clyffe whom you can accuse of honest fealty?”

“No one more than another, dear Marion,” answered Mrs. Hepburn thoughtfully. “They were all respectful to me—nay, even kind; but they could not forget, I think, that I was this woman’s niece. They liked the Clyffard race, their natural lords—and es-

pecially their late master, Ralph—but not the interloping Cairrs. No; I cannot fix upon a single face in which so much of pity as this letter breathes has ever shewn itself.”

“Then I would not go to Clyffe, dear Mildred,” exclaimed Mrs. Carey. “Remain here; or, still better, come to us. Set the law to work at once. Give this woman to know that if any harm comes to Milly, she herself will pay for it with her *life*. We do not live in times when murder goes unpunished, and far less dares, with its reeking hand, to point thus gibingly at those whom it has made desolate.”

“Ah, that was how my own dear Raymond used to speak,” cried Mildred with agitation. “You feel as he felt, indignant—nobly brave; but again, I say, You do

not know this woman. She fears nothing—nothing—except that she should be thwarted in her purpose. *I* do not want revenge; I want my child, my Milly. If she would but say, ‘There, take her, safe and well,’ I would promise never to molest her more.”

“So would not I, then,” cried the lieutenant’s wife with flushing cheeks. “What! forgive the wretch who set a man to slay my husband? No; had she twenty lives, she would need to look to them all. And if, in truth, she sat above the law, then *without* the law would I exact the penalty. I have no child, ’tis true, nor, as I hope, may I ever bear a child, if, having borne it, it should make me thus forgetful of my husband’s wrongs—— Pardon me, Mildred; I have a home unshattered, a hus-

band living—I know not what it is to be forlorn like you, or, perhaps, like you, I should sit down content with any shred of comfort that the destroyer might permit me to retain, and almost thankful that so much was left.”

For a minute or so, over Mildred’s face passed traces of some painful inward struggle, but presently it grew calm, and even smiling. “I love you for your frankness, Marion, quite as much as for your charity. Some day, perhaps—not now—you will know how much I thank you for it; how my heart yearns towards yours. Perhaps again, after this day and night, I shall never see you more; then God will thank you for me, and far better. May it be long, indeed, ere death o’ershadow *your* dwelling, and may loss like mine be never known to

your true heart. Nay, do not weep, dear Marion: it is your part, not mine, to play the comforter; and that you have done so, He will not forget, who repays human love with love divine. May he suffer us, in Heaven, if not here, to meet again."

"But what mean you, Mildred?" murmured Mrs. Carey, through her tears. "Whither are you going?"

"I start to-morrow morning, Marion, for Clyffe Hall."

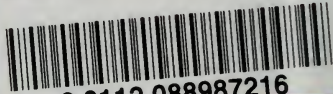
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